The HEART OF UNAGA

RIDGWELL CULLUM

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The Heart of Unaga

By

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The Heart of Unaga

PART I

CHAPTER I

JULYMAN TELLS OF THE "SLEEPER" INDIANS

STEVE ALLENWOOD raked the fire together. A shower of sparks flew up and cascaded in the still air of the summer night. A moment later his smiling eyes were peering through the thin veil of smoke at the two dusky figures beyond the fire. They were Indian figures, huddled down on their haunches, with their moccasined feet in dangerous proximity to the live cinders strewn upon the ground.

"Oh, yes?" he said. "And you guess they sleep all the time?"

The tone of his voice was incredulous.

"Sure, boss," one of the Indians returned, quite unaffected by the tone. The other Indian remained silent. He was in that happy condition between sleep and waking which is the very essence of enjoyment to his kind.

Inspector Allenwood picked up a live coal in his bare fingers. He dropped it into the bowl of his pipe. Then, after a deep inhalation or two, he knocked it out again.

"'Hibernate'—eh? That's how we call it," he said presently. Then he shook his head. The smile had passed out of his eyes. "No. It's a dandy notion. But —it's not true. They'd starve plumb to death. You see, Julyman, they're human folks—the same as we are."

The flat denial of his "boss" was quite without effect upon Julyman. Oolak, beside him, roused himself sufficiently to turn his head and blink enquiry at him. He was a silent creature whose admiration for those who could sustain prolonged talk was profound.

"All same, boss, that so," Julyman protested without emotion. "Him same like all men. Him just man, squaw, pappoose. All same him sleep—sleep—sleep, when snow comes," Julyman sucked deeply at his pipe and spoke through a cloud of tobacco smoke. "Julyman not lie. Oh, no. Him all true. When Julyman young man—very young—him father tell him of Land of Big Fire. Him say all Indian man sleeping—so." He leant over sideways, with his hands pressed together against his cheek to illustrate his meaning. "Him father say this. Him say when snow come All Indian sleep. One week—two week. Then him wake—so." He stretched himself, giving a great display of a weary half-waking condition. "Him sit up. The food there by him, an' he eat—eat plenty much. Then him drink. An' bimeby him drink the spirit stuff again. Bimeby, too, him roll up in blanket. Then him sleep some more. One week—two week. So. An' bimeby winter him all gone. Oh, him very wise man. Him no work lak hell same lak white man. No. Him sleep—sleep all him winter. An' when him wake it all sun, an' snow all gone. All very much good. Indian man him go out. Him hunt the caribou. Him fish plenty good. Him kill much seal. Make big trade. Oh, yes. Plenty big trade. So him

come plenty old man. No him die young. Only very old. Him much wise man."

The white man smiled tolerantly. He shrugged.

"Guess you got a nightmare, Julyman," he said. "Best turn over."

Steve had nothing to add. He knew his scouts as he knew all other Indians in the wide wilderness of the extreme Canadian north. These creatures were submerged under a mental cloud of superstition and mystery. He had no more reason to believe the story of "hibernating" Indians than he had for believing the hundred and one stories of Indian folklore he had listened to in his time.

Julyman, too, considered the subject closed. He had said all he had to say. So the spasm of talk was swallowed up by the silence of the summer night.

The fire burned low, and was replenished from the wood pile which stood between the two teepees standing a few yards away in the shadow of the bush which lined the trail. These men, both white and coloured, had the habit of the trail deeply ingrained in them. But then, was it not their life, practically the whole of it? Stephen Allenwood was a police officer who represented the white man's law in a district as wide as a good-sized European country, and these scouts were his only assistants.

They were at headquarters now enjoying a brief respite from the endless trail which claimed all their life and energies. And such was the nature of their work, and so absorbing the endless struggle of it, that their focus of holiday-making was little better than sitting over a camp-fire at night smoking, and occasionally talking, and waiting for the call of nature summoning them to their blankets.

It was a wonderful night, still and calm, and with a radiance of starlight overhead. There was the busy hum

of insect life from the adjacent woods, a deep murmur from the sluggish tide of the great Caribou River which drained the country for miles around. The occasional sigh that floated upon the air spoke of lofty pine crests bending under a light top breeze which refrained from disturbing the lower air. The night left the impression of unbreakable peace, of human content, and a world where elemental storms were unknown.

But the impression was misleading, as are all such impressions in nature's wild, and where the human heart beats strongly. There was no content in the grey eyes of the white man as he sat gazing into the heart of the fire. Then, too, not one of them but knew the cruel moods of the great Northland.

A wonderful companionship existed between these men. It was something more than the companionship of the long trail. They had fought the battle of life together for eight long years, enduring perils and hardships which had brought them an understanding and mutual regard which no difference in colour or education could lessen. For all the distinction of the police officer's rank and his white man's learning, for all the Indians were dark-skinned, uncultured products of the great white outlands, they were three friends held by bonds which only the hearts of real men could weld.

The territory over which Steve Allenwood exercised his police control was well-nigh limitless from a "one-man" point of view. From his headquarters, which lay within the confines of the Allowa Indian Reserve on the Caribou River, it reached away to the north as far as the Arctic Circle. To the west, only the barrier of the great McKenzie River marked its limits. To the south, there was nothing beyond the Reserve claiming his official capacity, except the newly grown township of Deadwater, two miles away. Eastwards? Well, East

was East. So far as Inspector Allenwood knew his district had no limits in that direction, unless it were the rugged coast line of the Hudson's Bay itself.

His task left Steve Allenwood without complaint. It was never his way to complain. Doubtless there were moments in his life when he realized the overwhelming nature of it all. But he no more yielded to it than he would yield to the overwhelming nature of a winter storm. That was the man. Patient; alive with invincible courage and dispassionate determination. Square, calm, strong, like the professional gambler he always seemed to have a winning card to play at the right moment. And none knew better than his scouts how often that card had meant the difference between a pipe over the warm camp-fire and the cold comfort of an icy grave.

Julyman was troubled at the unease he observed in the white man's eyes. It had been there on and off for some days now. It had been there more markedly earlier in the evening when the white man had helped his girl wife into the rig in which Hervey Garstaing, the Indian Agent, was driving Dr. and Mrs. Ross, and their two daughters, to the dance which was being given down at the township by the bachelors of Deadwater. Since then the look had deepened, and Julyman, in spite of his best efforts, had failed to dispel it. Even his story of a race of "hibernating" Indians had been without effect.

But Julyman did not accept defeat easily. And presently he removed the foul pipe from his thin lips, and spat with great accuracy into the heart of the fire.

"Bimeby she come," he said, in his low, even tones, while his black, luminous eyes were definitely raised to the white man's face. "Oh, yes. Bimeby she come. An' boss then him laff lak hell. Julyman know. Julyman have much squaw. Plenty."

Steve started. For a moment he stared. Then his easy smile crept into his steady eyes again and he nodded.

"Sure," he said. "Bimeby she come. Then I laff—like hell."

Julyman's sympathy warmed. He felt he had struck the right note. His wide Indian face lit with an unusual smile.

"Missis, him young. Very much young," he observed profoundly. "Him lak dance plenty—heap. It good. Very good. Bimeby winter him come. Cold lak hell. Missis no laff. Missis not go out. Boss him by the long trail. So. Missis him sit. Oh yes. Him sit with little pappoose. No dance. No nothin'. Only snow an' cold—lak hell."

This time the man's effort elicited a different response. Perhaps he had over-reached. Certainly the white man's eyes had lost the look that had inspired the Indian. They were frowning. It was the cold frown of displeasure. Julyman knew the look. He understood it well. So he went no further. Instead he spat again into the fire and gave himself up to a luxurious hate of Hervey Garstaing, the Indian Agent, whom all Indians hated.

Julyman was only a shade removed from his original savagery. There were times when he was not removed from savagery at all. This was such a moment. For he abandoned himself to the silent contemplation of a vision of the heart of the Indian Agent roasting over the fire before him. It was stuck on the cleaning-rod of his own rifle like a piece of bread to be toasted. Furthermore his was the hand holding the cleaning-rod. He would willingly throw the foul heart to the camp dogs—when it was properly cooked.

His vision was suddenly swept away by a sound which came from somewhere along the trail in the direction of

Deadwater. There was a faint, indistinct blur of voices. There was also the rattle of wheels, and the sharp clip of horses' hoofs upon the hard-beaten road. He instinctively turned his head in the direction. And as he did so Steve Allenwood stood up. Just for a moment the white man stood gazing down the shadowed trail. Then he moved off in the direction of his four-roomed log house.

Left alone the Indians remained at the fireside; Oolak—the silent—indifferent to everything about him except the pleasant warmth of the fire; Julyman, on the contrary, angrily alert. He was listening to the sounds which grew momentarily louder and more distinct. And with vicious relish he had already distinguished Hervey Garstaing's voice amongst the rest. It was loud and harsh. How he hated it. How its tones set the dark blood in his veins surging to his head.

"Why sure," he heard him say, "the boys did it good. They're bright boys."

In his crude fashion the scout understood that the Agent was referring to the evening's entertainment. It was the soft voice of Mrs. Ross which replied, and Julyman welcomed the sound. All Indians loved the "med'cine woman," as they affectionately called the doctor's wife.

"It was the best party we've had in a year," she cried enthusiastically. "You wouldn't have known old Abe's saloon from a city hall at Christmas time, with its decorations and its "cuddle-corners" all picked out with Turkey red and evergreens. And you girls! My! you had a real swell time. There were boys enough and to spare for you all. And they weren't the sort to lose much time either. The lunch was real elegant, too, with the oysters and the claret cup. My! it certainly was a swell party."

The wagon had drawn considerably nearer. The quick ears of the Indian had no difficulty with the language of the white folk. His main source of interest was the identity of those who were speaking. And, in particular, he was listening for one voice which he had not as yet been able to distinguish. Hervey Garstaing seemed to do most of the talking. And how he hated the sound of that voice.

"Why, say, Dora," he heard him exclaim in good-natured protest, as the outline of the team loomed up out of the distance. "I don't guess Mrs. Allenwood and I sat out but two dances. Ain't that so, Nita?"

Julyman's ears suddenly pricked. He may have been an uncultured savage, but he was a man, and very human. And the subtle inflection, as the Agent addressed himself to Steve Allenwood's wife, was by no means lost upon him.

"Three!"

The answer came in chorus from the two daughters of the doctor. And it came with a giggle.

"Oh, if you're going to count a supper 'extra,' why—Anyway what's three out of twenty-seven. There's no kick coming to that. Guess a feller would be all sorts of a fool——"

"If he didn't take all that's coming his way at a dance," broke in the doctor's genial voice, with a laugh.

The wagon was abreast of him, and Julyman's eyes were studiously concerned with the glowing heart of the fire. But nothing escaped them. Nothing ever did escape them. He closely scanned the occupants of the wagon. Dr. and Mrs. Ross were in the back seat, and their two daughters were facing them. Hervey Garstaing was driving, and Nita Allenwood was sitting beside him. It was all just as it had been earlier in the evening when he had seen them set out for Deadwater.

Oh, yes. It was all the same—with just a shade of difference. Nita was sitting close—very close to the teamster. She was sitting much closer than when Steve, earlier in the evening had tucked the rug about her to keep the chill summer evening air from penetrating the light dancing frock she was wearing. They were both tucked under one great buffalo robe now. It was a robe he knew to be Hervey Garstaing's.

As the vehicle passed the fire Dr. Ross flung a genial greeting at the two Indians. Julyman responded with a swift raising of his eyes, and one of his broad, unfrequent smiles. Then, as the wagon passed, his eyes dropped again to the fire.

He knew. Oh, yes, he knew. Had he not sat with many squaws who seemed desirable in his eyes? Yes, he had sat just so. Close. Oh, very close. Yes, he was glad his boss had taken himself off. Maybe he was looking down into the depths of the basket which held the little white pappoose back there in his home. It was good to look at the little pappoose when there was trouble at the back of a father's eyes. It made the trouble much better. How he hated the white man, Hervey Garstaing.

. . . . . .

For once Julyman's instincts were at fault. He had read the meaning of Steve Allenwood's sudden departure in the light of his own interpretation of the trouble he had seen in the man's grey eyes. He was entirely wrong.

Steve had heard the approaching wagon, and he knew that his wife and the other folk were returning from the dance. But almost at the same instant he had detected the sound of horses' hoofs in an opposite direction. It was in the direction of his home. Julyman had missed

the latter in his absorbed interest in the return of these folk from Deadwater.

Steve reached the log home in the bluff at the same moment as a horseman reined up at his door. The man in the saddle leant over, peering into the face of the Inspector. The darkness left him uncertain.

"Deadwater post?" he demanded abruptly.

Steve had recognized the man's outfit. The brown tunic and sidearms, the prairie hat, and the glimpse of a broad yellow stripe on the side of the riding breeches just where the man's leather chapps terminated on his hips. These things were all sufficient.

"Sure."

"Inspector Allenwood, sir?"

The man's abrupt tone had changed to respectful inquiry.

"I'm your man, Corporal."

The Corporal flung out of the saddle.

"Sorry I didn't rec'nize you, sir," he said saluting quickly. "It's pretty dark. It's a letter from the Superintendent—urgent." He drew a long, blue envelope from his saddle wallets and passed it to his superior. "Maybe you can direct me to the Indian Agent, Major Garstaing, sir. I got a letter for him."

Steve Allenwood glanced up from the envelope he had just received.

"Sure. Best cut through the bluff. There's a trail straight through brings you to his house. It's mostly a mile and a half. Say, you'll need supper. Get right along back when you've finished with him. When did you start out?"

"Yesterday morning, sir."

The Inspector whistled.

"Fifty miles a day. You travelled some."

The Corporal patted his steaming horse's neck.

"He's pretty tough, is old Nigger, sir," he said, with quiet pride. "Mr. McDowell wanted me to pick up a horse at Beaufort last night, but I wouldn't have done any better. Nigger can play the game a week without a worry. Guess I'll get on, sir, and make back after awhile. That the barn, sir?" he went on, pointing at a second log building a few yards from the house, as he swung himself into the saddle again. "I won't need supper. I had that ten miles back on the trail. I off-saddled at an Indian lodge where they lent me fire to boil my tea."

Steve nodded.

"Very well, Corporal. There's blankets here in the office when you come back. This room, here," he added, throwing open the door. "I'll set a lamp for you. There's feed and litter for your plug at the barn. Rub him down good."

"Thank you, sir."

The man turned his horse and headed away for the trail through the bluff, and Steve watched him go. Nor could he help a feeling of admiration for the easy, debonair disregard of difficulties and hardship which these men of his own force displayed in the execution of their work. In his utter unself-consciousness he was quite unaware that wherever the police were known his own name was a household word for these very things which he admired in another.

He passed into his office and lit the lamp. Then he seated himself at the simple desk where his official reports were made out. It was a plain, whitewood table, and his office chair was of the hard Windsor type.

He tore open his letter and glanced at its contents. It was from his own immediate superior, Superintendent McDowell, and dated at Fort Reindeer. It was quite brief and unilluminating. It was a simple official order to place himself entirely at the disposal of Major Hervey

Garstaing, the Indian Agent of the Allowa Indian Reserve —who was receiving full instructions from the Indian Commissioner at Ottawa—on a matter which came under his department.

He read the letter through twice. He was about to read it for a third time, but laid it aside. Instead he rose from the table and moved towards the door as the wagon from Deadwater drew up outside.

CHAPTER II

THE PASSING OF A DREAM

STEVE and his wife were in the parlour of their little home. It was the home which Steve had had built to replace his bachelor shanty, and which together they had watched grow, and over the furnishing of which they had spent hours of profound thought and happy discussions.

The office was entirely separate, that is, it had its own entrance door and no communication with the rest. The private quarters consisted of three rooms. The parlour, a bedroom for Steve and Nita, and, leading out of the latter, a small apartment sacred to the tiny atom of humanity which they had christened Coqueline, and whom the man, from the moment his eyes had been permitted to gaze upon her, some fifteen months earlier, regarded as the most perfect, wonderful, priceless treasure in the world. Beyond this, a simple leanto kitchen provided all they needed for their creature comfort.

It was all characteristic of the Northern world. The walls were of lateral logs, and the roof was of a similar material, while the entire interior was lined with red pine match-boarding. It was strong, and square, and proof against the fiercest storm that ever blew off the Arctic ice, which was all sufficient in a country where endurance was man's chief concern.

Nita was seated in the rocking-chair which Steve had

set ready for her beside the stove, whose warmth was welcome enough even on a summer night. She was sipping a cup of steaming coffee which he had also prepared. But there was nothing of the smiling delight in her eyes which the memory of her evening's entertainment should have left there.

The man himself was standing. He was propped against the square table under the window. He was smoking, and watching the girl wife he idolized as she silently munched the slice of layer cake which he had passed her. He was wondering if the long-expected, and long-feared moment of crisis in their brief married life had arrived. He had watched its approach for weeks. And he knew that sooner or later it must be faced. He was even inclined to force it now, for such was his way. Trouble was in her eyes, and he felt certain of its nature. Nita was not made of the stuff that could withstand the grind of the dour life of the Northland which he loved.

They had been married about three years and Nita had as yet spoken no actual word of complaint. But the complaint was there at the back of her pretty eyes. It had been there for months now. Steve had watched it grow. And its growth had been rapid enough with the passing of the first months of the delirious happiness which had been theirs, and which had culminated in the precious arrival of their little daughter Coqueline.

"Guess you must have had a real good time," Steve said, by way of breaking the prolonged silence.

For reply the girl only nodded.

The contrast between them was strongly marked. Nita was pretty—extremely pretty, and looked as out of place in this land she was native to as Steve looked surely a part of it. But her charm was of that purely physical type which gains nothing from within. Her eyes were

wide, childlike, and of a deep violet. Her hair was fair and softly wavy. Her colouring had all the delicacy which suggested the laying on by an artist's brush, and which no storm or sun seemed to have power to destroy. Her slight figure possessed all those perfect contours which are completely irresistible in early youth. Furthermore these things were supported to the utmost by the party frock she was wearing, and over which she had spent weeks of precious thought and labour.

Steve was of the trail. Face and body were beaten hard with the endless struggle of it all. His rough clothing, which had no relation to the smart Inspector's uniform he was entitled to wear, bore witness to the life that claimed him. His only claim to distinction was the sanity and strength that looked out of his steady grey eyes, the firmness and decision of his clean-shaven lips, and his broad, sturdy body with its muscles of iron.

"You'll be tired, too," he went on kindly. "You'd best get to bed when you've had a warm. I'll fix the chores."

He moved from his position at the table, and, passing out into the leanto kitchen, returned a moment later with a small saucepan which he placed on the shining top of the stove.

"Mrs. Ross seems to figure it was all sorts of a swell party," he went on. "She guesses the boys must have worried themselves to death fixing Abe's saloon so it didn't look like—Abe's saloon."

The man's smile was gently humorous. For once he had not the courage to pursue the downright course which his nature prompted. Little Coqueline was foremost in his thoughts. Then there was the memory of all the happiness his home meant to him, and he feared that which undue precipitancy might bring about.

The girl looked up from the stove. Her eyes abandoned their intense regard with seeming reluctance.

"It was all—wonderful. Just wonderful," she said in the tone of one roused from a beautiful dream.

"Abe's saloon?"

Steve's incautious satire suddenly precipitated the crisis he feared. The girl's eyes flashed a hot look of resentment. He was laughing at her. She was in no mood to be made sport of, or to have her words made sport of. She sat up with a start and leant forward in her chair in an attitude that gave force to her sharp enquiry.

"And why not?" she demanded, her violet eyes darkening under the frown of swift anger which drew her pretty brows together. "Why not Abe's saloon, or—or any other place?" She set her coffee cup on the floor with a clatter, and her hands clasped the arms of her chair as though she were about to spring to her feet. "Yes," she continued, with increasing heat, "why not Abe's saloon? It's not the place. It's not the folk, even. Those things don't matter. It's the thing itself. The whole thing. The glimpse of life when you're condemned to existence on this fierce outworld. It's the meaning of it. A dance. It doesn't sound much. Maybe it doesn't mean a thing to you but something to laugh at, or to sneer at. It's different to me, and to other folks, who—who aren't crazy for the long trail and the terrible country we're buried in. The decorations. The flags. Yes, the cheap Turkey red, and the fiddler's music—a half-breed fiddler—and the music of a pianist who spends most of his time getting sober. The folks who are all different from what we see them every day. Tough, hard-living, hard-swearing men all hidden up in their Sunday suits, and handing you ceremony as if you were some queen. Then the sense of pleasure in every heart, with all the cares and troubles of life pushed into the background—at least for a while. These things are a

glimpse of life to us poor folk who spend all our years in the endless chores of an inhospitable country. You can smile, Steve. You can sneer at Abe's saloon. But I tell you you haven't a right to just because these things don't mean a thing to you. There's nothing means anything to you but your work——"

"And my wife, and my kiddie, and my—home."

The man's deep voice broke in sharply upon the light, strident tones of the angry girl. He spoke while he stirred the contents of the saucepan he had placed on the stove. But the interruption only seemed to add fuel to the girl's volcanic flood of bitter feeling. A laugh was the prompt retort he received.

"Your wife. Oh, yes, I know. You'd have her around all the time in her home, slaving at the chores that would break the spirit of a galley slave. Oh, it's no use pretending. It's got to come out. It's here," she rushed on, pressing her hands hysterically against her softly rounded bosom. "The dream is past. All dreams are past. I'm awake now—to this," she indicated the room about her, simple almost to bareness in its furnishing, with a gesture of indescribable feeling. "It's all I've got to waken to. All I've got to look forward to. I've tried to tell myself there's a good time coming, when I can peer into the great light world, and snatch something of the joy of it all. I've tried, I've tried. But there isn't. It's the cold drear of this northland. It's chores from daylight to dark, and all the best years of life hurrying behind me as if they were yearning to make me old before I can get a chance to—live. I'm sick thinking. Show me. What is there? You're an Inspector, and we get a thousand dollars a year, and the rations we draw from the Indian Agency. You'll never get a Superintendent. You've no political pull, shut off up here well nigh in sight of the Arctic ice. I'm twenty-

two with years and years of it before me, and all the time I'll need to go on counting up my cents how I can get through till next pay-day comes around. Don't talk to me of your wife."

The injustice of the girl's unreasoning complaint was staggering. But it smote the heart of the man no less for that. Whatever his inward feelings, however, outwardly he gave no sign. He did not even raise his eyes from the saucepan he was stirring with so much deliberation and care.

"You're wrong, little girl," he said with quiet emphasis, and without one shadow of the emotion that was stirring behind the words. "You're dead wrong. You've got all those things before you. The things you're crazy for. And when they come along I guess they'll be all the sweeter for the waiting, all the better for the round of chores you're hating now, all the more welcome for the figgering you need to do now with the cents we get each month. You don't know how I stand with Ottawa. I do. There's just two years between me and the promotion you reckon I can't get. That's not a long time. Then we move to a big post where you can get all the dancing you need, and that won't be in Abe's saloon. You know that when my old father goes—and I'm not yearning for him to go—he'll pass me all he has, which is fifty thousand dollars and his swell farm in Ontario."

He paused and dipped out some of the contents of the saucepan in the spoon he was stirring it with. He tested its temperature. Then he went on with his preparations.

"Is there a reasonable kick coming to any woman in those things?" he demanded. "You knew most of what I'm telling you now when you guessed you loved me enough to marry me, and to help me along the road I'd

marked out. Have I done a thing less than I promised?" he went on passing back to the table and picking up the glass bottle lying there, and removing its top. "If I have just tell me, and I'll do all I know—" He shook his head. "It's all unreasonable. Maybe you're tired. Maybe——"

"It isn't unreasonable," Nita cried sharply. "That's now men always say to a woman when they can't understand. I tell you I'm sick with the hopelessness of it all. You aren't sure of your promotion. You haven't got it yet. And maybe your father will live another twenty years. Oh, God, to think of another twenty years of this. Do you know you're away from home nine months out of twelve? Do you know that more than half my time I spend guessing if you're alive or dead? And all the time the grind of the work. The same thing day after day without relief." She watched the man as he poured the contents of the saucepan into the bottle, and her eyes were hot with the state of hysterical anger she had worked herself into. "Oh," she cried with a helpless, despairing gesture, as Steve returned the saucepan to the table. "I'm sick of it all. I hate it all, when I think of what life could be. The thought of it drives me mad. I hate everything. I hate myself. I hate——"

"Stop it!"

Steve thrust the stopper into the neck of the bottle. He had turned. His steady eyes were sternly compelling. They were shining with a light Nita had never witnessed in them before. She suddenly became afraid. And her silence was instant and complete. She sat breathlessly waiting.

"I've done with this fool talk," Steve cried almost roughly. "I've listened to too much already. I'm not figgering to let you break things between us. There's more than you and me in it. There's that poor little

kiddie in the other room. Say, I've seen this coming. I've seen it coming—weeks. I've seen a whole heap that hurts a man that loves his wife, and guesses he wants to see her happy. I've seen what isn't good for a father to see, either. You've told me the things you guess *you* feel, and now I'm going to tell you the things I feel. You reckon the things I say about your good time coming are hot air. They're not. But you've got to get fool notions out of your head, and work for the things you want, the same as I reckon to. I'm out to make good—for you. Understand, for you, and for little Coqueline. I'm out to make good with all that's in me. And it don't matter a curse to me if all hell freezes over, I'm going to make good. Get that, and get it good. It's a sort of lifeline that ought to make things easy for you. There's just one thing that can break my play, Nita. Only one. It's your weakening. It's up to me to see you don't weaken. You need to take hold of the notion we're partners in this thing. And don't forget I'm senior partner, and my word goes. Just now my word is kind of simple. If you don't feel like carrying on for me, you need to remember there's our little Coqueline. She's part of you. She's part of me. And she's got a claim on you that no human law can ever rob her of. Well, the proposition between us has two sides. My side means the trail, and the job that's mine. I need to face it with a clear head, and an easy mind. My side means I got to get busy with every nerve in my body to get you an ultimate good time, and see you get all you need to make you good an' happy. That's the one purpose I dream about. Maybe your side's different. But I don't guess it's any easier. You've got to wait around till those things come along. But you've got more to do than that. You've got to play this old game right. Your work's by this home. It don't matter if it's winter

or summer, if it's storming or sunshine. You've got to do the chores you're guessing you hate, and you need to do them right, and willingly. We're man and wife. And these chores are yours by all the laws of God, and the Nature that made you the mother of our little Coqueline. You've got to cut this crazy notion for fool pleasures right out, till the pleasure time comes around. That time isn't yet. The woman who lets her child and her home suffer for joy notions isn't worth the room she'll take in hell later. Well, see and get busy, and let's have no more fool talk and crazy notions. Here, take this," he went on, in his deliberate, forceful way, thrusting the baby's feeding bottle into the girl's hands. "That's the kiddie's feed. Guess I fixed it because—well, maybe because you're tired. Take it to her. Give it to her. And, as long as you live don't you ever forget she's the right to your love, and to my love, and every darn thing we know to make things right for her."

The force of the man was irresistible. It was something the girl had never witnessed before. She had only known the husband, devoted, gentle, almost yielding in his great love. The man that had finished talking now was the man Julyman regarded above all others.

Nita took the bottle thrust into her hands, and, without a word, she rose from her chair and passed into the bedroom which the baby's room adjoined.

Steve watched her go. His hungry eyes followed her every movement. His heart was torn by conflicting emotions. His love told him that he had been harsh almost to brutality, but his sense warned him he had taken the only course which could hope to achieve the peace and happiness which was Nita's right as well as his own.

He had meant to fight for these things as he would fight on the trail against the forces of Nature seeking to

overwhelm him. He would yield nothing. For all his words had cost him he was conscious of the rightness of the course he had taken. But he was fighting a battle in which forces were arrayed against him of which he was wholly unaware.

As Nita passed into the bedroom the sound of footsteps outside broke the silence of the room. A moment later he turned in response to a knock on his door.

. . . . . .

Ten minutes later Steve was seated at the desk in his office. He was in the company of Major Hervey Garstaing, the Indian Agent. The Corporal, from Reindeer, was already rolled up in the blankets which were spread out in the corner of the room. His work had been accomplished. He was physically weary. And, judging by the sound of his regular breathing, Nature had claimed her own the moment his head had touched the carefully folded overcoat which served him for a pillow.

The bare severity of the room was uninviting. There was little display in the work of the police. Utility and purpose was the keynote of their lives and at the year's end the tally of work accomplished was the thing that mattered.

Steve preferred to receive the Indian Agent in his office. Garstaing had never been an intimate of his. Their relations were official, and just sufficiently neighbourly for men who lived within two miles of each other in a country where human companionship was at a premium.

The office table stood between them. The spare chair beyond the desk always stood ready for a visitor, and Garstaing had accepted it. Steve had moved the oil lamp on one side, that their view of each other might be uninterrupted.

They were both smoking, and Garstaing was doing the

talking. At all times Steve preferred that his visitors should do most of the talking.

"I guessed I best come right along," he said, regarding the other closely. "You see, I'll be handin' out Treaty Money to the darn neches to-morrow morning. It'll take me best part of the day." He removed the pipe from his rather wide mouth, and held it poised significantly. "This thing won't stand keeping. It's—murder. There's two of 'em, I guess. Traders. Marcel Brand and his partner, Cyrus Allshore. Those are the names. Can't say I've heard of 'em before. Both of 'em dead—murdered—up there somewhere around the Unaga country. It's the Indians or Eskimo, whatever they are, who've done it."

"Yes."

Steve's gaze was directed searchingly at his visitor's good-looking face. At the moment it almost seemed as if he were regarding the man rather than his mission. And Garstaing was a somewhat interesting personality. It should have been a pleasant personality, if looks were any real indication. Garstaing was distinctly handsome. He was dark, and his swift-moving dark eyes looked always to be ready to smile. Then he possessed a superbly powerful body. But the threatened smile rarely matured, and when it did it added nothing of a pleasant nature for the student of psychology.

In age the two men were well matched, but they had little else in common. Garstaing's reputation, at least amongst men, was not a happy one. He was known to be a hard drinker. He was hot-headed and pleasure-loving. Furthermore he was given to an overbearing intolerance, in the indulgence of which his position as Indian Agent yielded him wide scope.

He ruled the Indians with an iron hand, and for all the stories of his cruelty and complete unscrupulousness

which reached beyond the confines of the reserve and the bitter hatred of the Indians he remained complete master of the situation.

There was little enough which Steve had not heard of the unsavouriness of this man's administration. He by no means gave credence to all of it, but it was not without effect upon his personal attitude towards him.

"I'm not wise to your instructions," Garstaing went on as Steve offered no further comment, "but mine are pretty clear, and they are straight from my Commissioner."

"I've to place myself entirely at your disposal."

Steve's reply came without any hesitation. His tone suggested unconcern. Garstaing's dark eyes snapped. Then they smiled their approval. It was that smile which added nothing pleasant to his personality.

"I guessed it was that way from the instructions they handed me," he said. Then he withdrew a bunch of papers from an inner pocket, and opened them, and selected a particular sheet. "Here it is," he said, and promptly read out an extract from the letter. "'You will at once place yourself in touch with the police in your district, and see that the whole matter is investigated—forthwith.'"

He glanced up as he uttered the final word.

"You know what that means?" he enquired, searching the eyes that were so profoundly observing him across the table.

Steve nodded.

"Sure."

"It means you'll have to make the Unaga country right away."

"Sure."

Again came Steve's monosyllabic agreement.

"It means one hell of a long trip," the Agent went on.

"Two years."

The simple finality of the police officer's reply left the other speechless for the moment. The tone of it amazed him. He had hastened across from the Agency directly he had received the Corporal's dispatch, not because he had to pay out Treaty Money in the morning, not because the whole matter would not keep even a week if necessary. Instantly on reading his instructions from the Indian Commissioner all thought of the crime to be investigated had passed out of his mind. His thoughts had flown to Steve Allenwood, and from him they had passed on to another. A vision of a sweet face with deep, violet eyes, and softly waving fair hair had leapt to his mind. Furthermore he still retained the sensation of a soft, warm hand which had been clasped within his under cover of the friendly fur robe as he drove the wagon back from the dance at Deadwater.

Two years. The man had spoken with as much indifference as if he had been contemplating a trip of two days. Garstaing drew a deep breath, and, returning his pipe to his capacious mouth ignited a match over the lamp chimney and re-lit it. Then, with a quick, nervous movement he picked up a separate bunch of the papers on the table before him and flung them across to his host.

"There you are," he cried, "that's the whole darn official story. You best keep it awhile, and read it. I got orders to hand you all you need. Indians, dog-team, rations. Any old thing you fancy. But—" he paused. His quick-moving eyes became suddenly still. They were gazing directly into those of the husband beyond the table. "You'll need to start out—right away."

Steve rose from his seat with a nod.

"I shall know when to start," he replied shortly.

Then he raised his arms above his head and stretched himself luxuriously while Garstaing sat watching him,

endeavouring to penetrate the man's tremendous barrier of reserve. But it remained impenetrable, and there was nothing left for him but to comply with his host's tacit invitation. He, too, rose from his seat.

"You best take a copy of the story," he said, as Steve moved towards the door. "Anyway I'll need the original later."

He was talking because the other compelled him to talk. And because he had that in his mind which made it impossible for him to remain silent.

Steve opened the door and peered out. The night was brilliantly star-lit. Garstaing was close behind him.

"It's tough on you, Allenwood," he said in a tone intended to express sympathy. "Two years. Gee!"

Steve's only reply was to move aside to let him pass out. It was as though Garstaing's expression of sympathy had at last found a weakness in his armour of reserve. His movement had been abrupt—startlingly abrupt.

"So long," he said coldly.

Just for one moment their eyes met. Steve's were frigidly non-committal. There was neither friendliness nor dislike in them. There was no emotion whatsoever. Garstaing's were questioning, searching, and full of an impulse that might have meant anything. But it was the police officer who controlled the situation, and the headstrong, intolerant Indian Agent who was obeying. He passed out, and his "So long" came back to the man in the doorway as the night swallowed him up.

Steve moved back to the table. In his deliberate fashion he leant over the lamp chimney and blew the light out. Then he passed out of the room and closed the door gently. He paused for a moment outside, and stood gazing in the direction which he knew Garstaing had taken. Presently he raised one hand and passed it

across his broad forehead. It remained for a moment pressed against the skin, which had suddenly become coldly moist. His fingers searched their way up through his abundant dark hair. It was a movement that expressed something like helpless bewilderment.

"Two years!" he muttered. "Two years!"

Then his arm dropped almost nervelessly to his side.

CHAPTER III

THE GOING OF STEVE

THERE are some personalities which never fail to permeate their neighbourhood with their presence. Of such was Dr. Ian Ross. His presence never failed to impress itself. The moment he crossed the threshold of his home the household became aware of it. There was his big voice, his deep-throated husky laugh. There was that strong-hearted kindly humanity always shining in his deep-set, blue eyes.

He had returned from his surgery at the agency for his midday meal, and his abundant toned hail reached his wife in a remote bedroom in the almost luxurious home which he had had set up amidst the spruce woods lining the Deadwater trail.

"Ho, Millie!" he cried. "Ho you, Mill!" he called again, without waiting for any response.

"I'll be right along, Mac," came back the cheerful reply.

"Fine. But don't stop to change your gown, there's a good soul. Guess it's feed time, anyway. And not so much 'Mac.' Guess I'm Ross of the Ross of Ardairlie, which is in the Highlands of Scotland, which is part of a small group of islands, which are dumped down in the Atlantic off the west coast of Europe. Maybe—you've heard tell."

The man flung his wide-brimmed hat on a side table

in the hall with a comfortable laugh. Then seating himself in a big chair, he ran his fingers through his crisp iron-grey hair.

He was a raw-boned, powerfully built man who seemed by nature the beau ideal for the healing of a race of savages who regard disease as inevitable, a visitation by the powers of evil, and something which must be submitted to in patience lest worse befall. Almost brusque of manner, forceful, he was as strong and kindly of heart as he was skilful. He was a product of the best Scottish school of medicine, and one of those rare souls whose whole desire in life is the relief of human suffering. Fortune had favoured him very practically. He had ample private means which enabled him to accept the paltry salary the Government offered him to take charge of a herd of its coloured children up on the Caribou River. Furthermore he had had the good fortune to marry a Canadian woman whose whole heart was wrapped up in him and his life's purpose.

So these two, with their two young children, had made their way north. The man had set up an ample, even luxurious home on the confines of the reserve, and they had settled down to battle with the exterminating diseases, which, since the civilizing process set in, the Indian seems to have become heir to. So far the battle had raged, for ten years, and it looked likely to last far beyond Ian Ross's lifetime.

Whatever other successes and failures he had had during that time he had achieved an affection from his patients quite as great as the hatred achieved by Hervey Garstaing in less than half that number of years.

The plump round figure of Millie Ross rustled into the hall.

"Where's Dora?"

The man's question came without turning from the

sunlit view beyond the doorway. A wonderful stretch of undulating wood-clad country lay spread out before him. It was a waste of virgin territory chequered with woodland bluffs, with here and there the rigid Indian teepee poles supporting their rawhide dwellings, peeping out from all sorts of natural shelters.

"Dora? Why, Dora's over with Nita Allenwood. That child spends most of her time there now."

Millie's cheerful, easy manner was perhaps the greatest blessing of Ian Ross's life. Her happy good temper spoke of a perfectly healthy body, and a mind full of a pleasant humour.

Dr. Ross withdrew a timepiece from his pocket.

"Now?" he cried. "Oh, you mean because of Steve's going off on the long trail. Five days isn't it before he goes?" He chuckled in his pleasant, tolerant fashion. "Sort of sympathetic butting in, isn't it? Guess heart and sense never were a good team. I'd say Dora's chock full of heart."

"And it's just as well for someone around this house to have a bunch of heart that can feel for other folks," Millie retorted promptly. "Say, you, Mac, there's two days past since word went round of Steve's going, and you haven't done a thing. Not a thing but continue to make life miserable for those poor neches who can't help themselves, and have to spend their play time in swallowing the dope you can't make filthy enough to please your notions of humanity."

The man laughed up into the smiling, admonishing eyes of the woman who meant so much to him.

"Hell!" he cried. "What would you have me do? Isn't it my job to see those poor devils right? Why, they'd lap up dope till you couldn't tell 'em from a New York drug store. The fouler it tastes the more surely they come back for more. I'd say I've lengthened the

sick list of this reserve till you'd think it was a Free Hospital, and there wasn't a healthy neche, squaw, or pappoose north of 60°."

Millie picked up the hat he had flung on the side table and hung it on a peg of the coat rack.

"What would I have you do?" she said, ignoring the rest of his remarks for the thought in her mind, and coming back to his chair and resting her plump hand on his crisp hair. "Why something else besides think of these scalliwag Indians. I'm all worried to death about Nita Allenwood and Steve."

The man stirred uneasily under the caressing fingers.

"So am I," he cried brusquely. "Well?"

"That's just what it isn't," Millie had withdrawn her hand. She moved to the doorway and gazed out into the sunlight. "I want to do something and just don't know how to do it. I know you hate folks who 'slop over.' But just think of the position. Steve's going to be away for two years, according to his reckoning. They've sent Corporal Munday to take over his post in his absence. What—what on earth is Nita to do in his absence? She'll get her rations, and her pay, and all that. But—she can't live around the post sort of keeping house for this boy—Munday. She can't live there by herself anyway. Think of her by that shack with her kiddie. Two years, here in a country—— Besides—"

"'Besides' nothing," exclaimed the man with that curious irritation of a troubled mind. "Is there need of 'besides' when you think of a good-looker girl who's barely twenty-two, with as dandy a baby as I've ever set eyes on, and who I helped into daylight, sitting around without her husband in a country that's peopled with white men whose morals would disgrace a dog-wolf? Two years! Why, it makes me sweat thinking. If that feller Steve don't see my way of looking at things I'm

going to tell him just what his parents ought to've been."

"And what's your way of thinking, Mac?" enquired his wife with the confidence of certain knowledge.

"My way? My way?" the man exploded, his blue eyes widening with incredulity. "Why, the way he's got to look. The way sense lies. That girl and her kiddie have got to come right along here and camp with us till the boy gets back. There's going to be no darn nonsense," he added threateningly, as though Millie were protesting. "She's going to come right here, where you can keep your dandy eye on her till——"

"Eyes—plural, Mac." Millie's smile was a goodly match for the summer day.

The doctor flung his head back in a deep-throated guffaw.

"Have it your own way," he cried. "One or two, they don't miss much. Anyway, I guessed I'd put it to you before I went over to fix things up."

"Sure," laughed Millie comfortably. "You most generally ask my consent before you get busy." Then, in a moment, she became serious. "But you're right, Mac," she said. "Dora and I have been talking that way ever since we heard. And Mabel swears she's going to write the Commissioner of Police all she thinks about it, and that's 'some.' It's cruel sending off a married man on a trip like that without fixing things for his wife. You see and fix things, Mac. Nita's just as welcome as a ray of sunshine right here with us. It's a shame! It's a wicked downright shame! And Steve ought to know better than to stand for it. He ought to——"

"He can't kick." The man shook his head. "He's looking to get a superintendentship. A kick would fix that for good. No, he's got no kick coming. You need to understand the Police force right. It's no use talking

that way. It's the work of the force first, last, and all the time. Everything else is nowhere, and the womenfolk, whom they discourage, last of all. And mind you, they're right. You can't run a family, and this hellish country at the same time. If the Police weren't what they were it would need seventy thousand of them instead of seven hundred to make this territory better than a sink of crime for every low down skunk who can't keep out of penitentiary anywhere else. This thing has me so worried I haven't appetite enough to care it's gone my feed time by a quarter hour. Isn't Miss Prue through with the darn potatoes, or—something?"

Millie laughed indulgently.

"I'll get along and see. You see, Miss Prue's a good and God-fearing squaw, when she isn't smoking her pipe or sitting asleep over the cookstove. Anyway, I'll chase her up," and she bustled off in the direction of the kitchen.

Left to himself Ian Ross forgot entirely that he was awaiting his dinner. His deep-set eyes were turned to the view beyond the door, and his thoughts were still further afield. He was thinking of the pretty, eager face he had watched at the bachelors' dance at Deadwater. He was thinking of the men who had approached Nita with the ceremony which had so delighted her. He was old enough and wise enough to appreciate fully the dangers she would be confronted with in Steve's absence, dangers which it was more than likely Steve could not realize.

He liked Steve. For all their disparity of years a great friendship existed between them. Steve was a man who would succeed in anything he undertook. The doctor was sure of that. But—and this was the matter that troubled him most—Steve had utter and complete

faith in his wife, the same as he had in all those who possessed his regard. Steve was a man of single, simple purpose. Strong as a lion in the open battle where the danger was apparent, but in the more subtle dangers of life he was a child.

Well, there were men in their world who constituted just one of those grave subtle dangers to Steve in Steve's absence. Ian Ross shared with everybody else the hatred of Hervey Garstaing. He had seen Garstaing and Nita together at the dance. He had seen them together at other times. Oh,—he had never seen anything that was not perhaps perfectly legitimate. But he knew Hervey Garstaing better than most people at Deadwater. He saw far more of him than he desired. And Hervey was a good-looking man. Nita was young and full of a youthful desire for a good time. And then Hervey was also an unscrupulous hound whom it would have given the doctor the greatest pleasure in life to shoot.

. . . . . .

Ian Ross laughed out loud as he strode through the woods on his way to the police post. A thought had occurred to him which pleased his simple mind mightily. It was not a very profound thought. And the humour of it was difficult to detect. But it pleased him, and he had to laugh, and when he laughed the echoes rang. It had occurred to him that it took a man of real brain to be a perfect "damn fool."

The inspiration of his thought was undoubtedly Steve Allenwood. Steve Allenwood and his affairs had occupied his thoughts all the morning, and had interfered with a due appreciation of the dinner he had just eaten. He was perturbed, and Millie had set the match to the powder train of his emotions and energies. His admira-

tion for Steve was as unstinted as his sympathy for the call that had been suddenly made on him. But he knew Steve, and realized the difficulties that lay before him in carrying out the programme of kindly purpose Millie and he had worked out over their midday meal. It was this which had brought him to the conclusion which had inspired his laugh.

In that brief instant the complete silence of the woods about him had been broken up in startling fashion. No shot from a rifle, no mournful cry of timber-wolf could disturb the spell of nature like the jarring note of the human voice.

But it had another effect. It elicited a response no less startling to the man who had laughed.

"Ho you, Mac!"

Ian Ross halted. He had recognized the voice instantly.

"That you, Steve?"

"Sure," came back the reply.

Instantly the Scotsman's lack of self-consciousness became apparent.

"How in hell did you know it was me?"

It was the turn of the invisible police officer to laugh.

"Guess there's only one laugh like yours north of 60°—less a bull moose can act that way." Then he went on. "Sharp to your left. I'm down here on the creek. I was making your place and this way cuts off quite a piece."

Ross turned off at once and his burly figure crashed its way through the barrier of delicate-hued spruce. A moment later he was confronting the officer on the bank of the creek.

Steve's smile was one of cordial welcome.

"I was figgering to get you before you went back to the agency," he said in explanation.

The doctor's eyes twinkled.

"And I was guessing to get you—before I went."

Steve nodded.

"We were chasing each other."

"Which is mostly a fool stunt."

"Mostly."

They stood smiling into each other's eyes for a moment.

"You were needing me—particular?" Steve enquired after a pause.

Ross glanced down at the gurgling water of the shallow stream as it passed over its rough gravel bed.

"I was needing a yarn. Nothing amiss at the post? You wanted me—particular?"

The smile in Steve's eyes deepened.

"No. I was needing a—yarn."

The doctor's twinkling eyes searched the clearing. A fallen tree was sprawling near by, with its upper boughs helping to cascade the waters of the stream. He pointed at it.

"Guess we don't need to wear our legs out."

Steve laughed shortly.

"That's where the neches beat us every time. You need to sit at a pow-wow."

"Sure. Their wise men sit most all the time."

They moved over to the tree trunk, and Ross accepted the extreme base of it and sat with his back against the up-torn roots. Steve sat astride the trunk facing him. Then by a common impulse the men produced their pipes. Steve's was alight first and he held a match for the other.

"You were chasing me up?" he said. "Nothing on the Reserve?"

"No." The doctor's pipe was glowing under the efforts of his powerful lungs. "Most of the neches are sleeping off the dope. It's queer how they're crazy for

physic. How's Nita and the kiddie? I haven't seen Nita since the dance."

Steve's smile died out quite suddenly. The doctor's observant eyes lost nothing of the change, although the sunshine on the dancing waters seemed to absorb his whole attention.

"Guess little Coqueline absorbs more bottles to the twenty-four hours than you'd ever guess she was made to fit," Steve replied with a half laugh. "She kind of reminds you of one of those African sand rivers in the rainy season. Nita's the same as usual. She had a good time at the dance."

"Yes." The doctor bestirred himself and withdrew his gaze from the tumbling waters. "You had something to say to me," he demanded abruptly, his blue eyes squarely challenging.

Steve nodded. A half smile lit his steady eyes.

"Sure. And—it isn't easy."

The Scotsman returned the half smile with interest.

"I haven't noticed it hard for folks to talk, unless it is to tell of their own shortcomings. Guess you aren't figgering that way. Maybe I can help you. I'd hate to be setting out on a two years' trip and leaving Millie to scratch around without me."

Steve's eyes lit.

"That's it, Doc," he said with a nod which told the other of the emotions stirring under his calm exterior. "Two years!" He laughed without any amusement. "It may be more, a hell of a sight. Maybe even I won't get back. You see, you never can figger what this north country's got waiting on you. It's up in the Unaga country. And I guess it's new to me. I'd say it's new to anyone. It's mostly a thousand miles I've got to make, right up somewhere on the north-west shores of Hudson's Bay."

"A—thousand miles! It's tough." Dr. Ross shook his head.

"An' it comes at a bad time for me," Steve went on thoughtfully. "Still, I guess it can't be helped. You see, it's murder! Or they reckon it is. A letter got through from Seal Bay. That's on the Hudson coast. The Indian Department don't know where it comes from. It seems to have been handed in by an Indian named Lupite. The folks tried to get out of him where he came from, but I guess he didn't seem to know. Anyway he didn't tell them. He said Unaga, and kind of indicated the north. Just the north. Well, it isn't a heap to go on. Still, that's the way of these things. I've got to locate the things the folks at Seal Bay couldn't locate. It seems there's a biggish trading post way up hidden somewhere on the plateau of Unaga. It was run by two partners, and they had a sort of secret trade. The man at Seal Bay—Lorson Harris—reckons it's a hell of an important trade. The names of these traders were Marcel Brand—a chemist—and Cy Allshore, a pretty tough northern man. These fellers used to come down and trade at Seal Bay. Well, I don't know much more except this letter came into Seal Bay—it's written in a woman's hand and in English—to say her husband, Marcel Brand, and this, Cy Allshore, have been murdered. And she guesses by Indians. She don't seem dead sure. But they've been missing over a year. I'm just handing you this so you'll know the sort of thing I'm up against. And I've got to leave Nita, and my little baby girl, for two years—sure."

The kindly doctor nodded. He removed his pipe, and cleared his throat. His eyes were alight with a ready smile that was full of sympathy.

"Say, you haven't got to worry a thing for them that way," he said. "It's tough leaving them. Mighty

tough. I get all that. And it sort of makes me wonder. But—Say, it's queer," he went on. "I was coming right along over to help fix things for you. And I was scared to death wondering how to do it without butting in. You were coming along over to me to set the same sort of proposition, and were scared to death I'd feel like turning you down. One of these days some bright darn fool'll fix up mental telepathy to suit all pocket-books. It'll save us all a deal of worry when that comes along. Now if that mental telepathy were working right now it would be handing the things passing in your head something like this: 'Why in hell can't that damned dope merchant, and that dandy woman who don't know better than to waste her time being his wife, come right along and fix something so Nita and the kiddie ain't left lonesome and unprotected while I'm away.' That's the kind of message I'd be getting from you. And you'd be getting one from me something in this way: 'If I don't screw up the two measly cents' worth of courage I've got, and go right across to Steve, and put the proposition Millie and I are crazy to make, why—why, Millie'll beat my brains out with a flat iron, and generally make things eternally unpleasant.' Having got these messages satisfactorily you and I would have set out—on the same path, mind. We'd have met right here: I should have said, 'Steve, my boy, your little gal Nita and that bright little bit of a bottle worrier you call your baby are coming right over to make their homes with Millie, and the gals, and me, till you get back. We're going to do just the best we know for them—same as we would for our own. It's going to be a real comfort for us to have them, and something more than a pleasure, and if you don't let 'em come—well, we'll be most damnably disappointed!' And you, being a straight, sound-thinking man in the main, but with a heap of notions that aren't always sound, but

which you can't just help, would say: 'See, right here, Doc, I don't approve boosting my burdens on other folks' shoulders. That's not my way, but anyway I'll be mighty thankful not to disappoint you, and to go away feeling my bits of property aren't lying around at the mercy of a country, and a race of folk that'll always remain a blot on any Creator's escutcheon!' Having said all this we'd likely go on talking for awhile about the folks and things we know, such as the men of our acquaintance who reckon they're white, and the rotten acts they do because rye whisky and the climate of the Northland's killed the only shreds of conscience they ever had. And then—why, maybe then we just part, and go back to our work feeling what darn fine fellers we are, and how almighty glad we are we aren't as—the other folk."

The smile which the doctor's whimsical manner had provoked in Steve's eyes was good to see. An overwhelming gratitude urged him to verbal thanks, but somehow a great feeling deep down on his heart forbade such expression.

"You mean—all that, Doc?" he said almost incredulously at last.

The other raised his broad loose shoulders expressively.

"I wish it was more."

Steve breathed a deep sigh. He shook his head. Then, with an impulsive movement, he thrust out one powerful hand.

Just for one moment the two men gripped in silence.

"I'll fix it with Nita," Steve said, as their hands fell apart.

"Yep. And Millie and the gals will go along over. She can't refuse them."

Steve flashed a sharply enquiring look into the other's eyes.

"Why should she want to?" he demanded.

The doctor suddenly realized the doubt he had implied. His own train of thought had found unconscious expression.

"There isn't a reason in the world," he protested, "except—she's a woman."

But his reply, for all its promptness, entirely missed its purpose. It failed completely to banish the trouble which had displaced the smile in Steve's eyes.

When Steve spoke his voice was low, and he seemed to be speaking to himself rather than to his companion.

"That's so," he said at last. And Ian Ross knew there was more in Steve's mind than the fear of the common dangers to which his wife and child would be exposed in his absence. How much he did not know. Perhaps he had no desire to know. Anyway, being a man of some wisdom, being possessed of a home, and a wife, and family of his own, he applied himself assiduously to the pipe which never failed to soothe his feelings, however much they might be disturbed.

. . . . . .

It was exactly a week from the time he had received his instructions that Steve's preparations were completed and the hour of his departure came round.

The afternoon was well advanced. Already the brilliant sun was drooping towards the misty range of lofty hills which cut the western skyline in the region of the Peace River country. Steve's horse was saddled and bridled, and tethered to the post outside the office door, where Corporal Munday was seated upon the sill awaiting the departure.

The "outfit" was already on the trail. That had left at sunrise. Its preparations had been simple, and even spare. But it was adequate. Steve and his Indians knew to the last fraction the requirements of a

journey such as lay before them. Year in, year out, they were accustomed to preparations for the long trail. This was longer than usual. That was all.

The officer's plans were considered to the last detail. Nothing that could be foreseen was neglected. Every stage of the journey to the Unaga country was measured in his mind, both for time and distance. Only the elements were perforce omitted from his calculations. This was in the nature of things. The elemental side of his undertaking was incalculable.

His way lay due north for a while along the course of the great Caribou River. This would bring him to the half-breed settlement at the Landing on the great lakes. It would also take him through the country of the Hiada Indians. Arrived at Ruge's trading post at the Landing, his horses and police, half-spring wagons would be left to the trader's care, for beyond this point their services would be dispensed with.

The second stage of the journey would be by water and portage. In this neighbourhood, where the wilderness of sparsely travelled country opened out, he would make for the headwaters of the beautiful Theton River. The river of a hundred lakes draining a wide tract of wooded country. It was a trail which was not unfamiliar; for his work not infrequently carried him into the territory of peaceful Caribou-Eater Indians, who so often became the victims of the warlike, hot-headed Yellow-Knives.

The river journey he calculated should bring him to Fort Duggan at the height of summer, and it was without any feeling of enthusiasm that he contemplated that fly-and-mosquito-ridden country at such a time of year. But it was necessary, and so he was left without alternative. Fort Duggan was the deserted ruin of an old-time trading post, it was the home of the Shaunekuk

Indians who were half Eskimo. It was also the gate of the mystery land of Unaga.

Unaga! The riddle of the wide northern-world. The land from which weird, incredible stories percolated through to the outside. They were stories of wealth. They were stories of savage romance. They were stories of the weird, terrible, and even monstrous. It was a land so unexplored as to be reputed something little better than a sealed book even to the intrepid Arctic explorer, who, at so great an expenditure of physical effort and courage, rarely accomplishes more than the blazing of a trail which seals up again behind him, and adds his toll to the graveyard which claims so many of the world's dauntless souls.

Unaga! The land unknown to the white man. And yet—news had come of the murder of two white men within its secret heart. Therefore the machinery of white man's law was set in motion, and the long, lean arm was reaching out.

Not less than a thousand miles of weary toil and infinite peril lay before Steve and his two Indian helpers. And a second thousand miles before the little home at Deadwater could hope to see him again. It was an overwhelming thought. Small blame to the heart that quailed before such an undertaking.

Steve had no thought for the immensity of the labour confronting him. He had no thought for anything but the purpose of his life. He knew that successful completion of the work before him would set the seal to his ambitions. He would then be able to lay at the feet of the girl who was the mother of his child the promotion to Superintendentship which should take her away from the dreary life of hardship which he knew to be so rapidly undermining that moral strength which was not abundantly hers.

These were the moments of the man's farewell to all that made up the spiritual side of his earthly life. It might be a final farewell. He could not tell. He knew the perils that lay ahead of him. But a great, passionate optimism burned deep down in his heart and refused him thought of disaster.

He was in the partially dismantled parlour with Nita and his baby girl. The last detail for the future of these two had been considered and prepared. At the moment of his going, Nita, too, would bid farewell to the post. And the precious home, the work of months of happy labour, would be passed on to the service of Steve's successor.

It was a moment that would surely live in the hearts of both. It was a moment when tearful eyes would leave to memory a picture perhaps to lighten the dreary months to come, a sign, a beacon, a consolation and support, a living hope for the painful months of separation when no word or sign could pass between them. They were moments sacred to husband and wife, upon which no earthly eyes have right to gaze.

The door opened and Steve passed out into the smiling sunshine. His steady eyes were dull and lustreless. His firm lips were a shade more tightly compressed. For the rest his limbs moved vigorously, his step lacked nothing of its wonted spring.

As he left the doorway his place was taken by Nita, who bore the waking infant Coquęline in her arms. Both were dressed ready to pass on to their new home.

Steve was clad for the summer trail, and his leather chapps creaked, and his spurs clanked as he passed round to the tying post at which his horse was tethered. Force of habit made him test the cinchas of his saddle before mounting.

He spoke over his shoulder to the man who had risen to his feet at his coming.

"Guess you got everything right, Corporal?" he said.

"Everything, sir."

"Good. My diary's right up to date," Steve went on. "Things are quiet just now. They'll get busy later."

He swung into the saddle and held out a hand.

"So long," he said, as the Corporal promptly gripped it.

"So long, sir. And—good luck."

"Thanks."

The horse moved away and Steve passed round to Nita. He drew rein opposite the door but did not dismount.

"Let's—get another peck at her, Nita," he said, and it almost seemed as if the words were jerked from under the restraint he was putting on himself.

The girl had no words with which to answer him. Her eyes were wide and dry. But from her pallor it was obvious deep emotion was stirring. She came to his side, and held the baby up to him, a movement that had something of the tragic in it.

The father swept his hat from his head and bent down in the saddle, and gazed yearningly into the sleeping child's cherubic face. Then he reached lower and kissed the pretty forehead tenderly.

"She'll be getting big when I see her again," he said, in a voice that was not quite steady.

Then a passionate light flooded his eyes as he looked into the face of his girl wife.

"For God's sake care for her, Nita," he cried. "She's ours—and she's all we've got. Here, kiss me, dear. I can't stop another moment, or—or I'll make a fool of myself."

The girl turned her face up and the man's passionate kisses were given across the small atom which was the pledge of their early love. Then Steve straightened up

in the saddle and replaced his hat. A moment later he had vanished within the woods through which he must pass on his way to Ian Ross and his wife, to whom he desired to convey his final word of thanks.

Nita stood silent, dry-eyed gazing after him. He was gone, and she knew she would not see him again for two years.

. . . . . .

The woodland shadows were lengthening. The delicate green of the trees had lost something of its brightness. Already the distance was taking on that softened hue which denotes the dying efforts of daylight.

Nita was passing rapidly over the footpath which would take her to her new home. She was alone with her child in her arms, and carrying a small bundle. Her violet eyes were widely serious, the pallor of her pretty cheeks was unchanged. But whatever the emotions that inspired these things she lacked all those outward signs of feeling which few women, under similar circumstances, could have resisted. There were no tears. Yet her brows were puckered threateningly. She was absorbed, deeply absorbed, but it was hardly with the absorption of blind grief.

She paused abruptly. The startled look in her eyes displayed real apprehension. The sound of someone or something moving in the low-growing scrub beside her had stirred her to a physical fear of woodland solitudes she had never been able to conquer.

She stood glancing in apprehension this way and that. She was utterly powerless. Flight never entered her head. Panic completely prevailed.

A moment later a man thrust his way into the clearing of the path.

"Hervey!"

His name broke from Nita in a world of relief. Then reaction set in.

"You—you scared me to death. Why didn't you speak, or—or something?"

Hervey Garstaing stood smilingly before her. His dark eyes hungrily devouring her flushed face and half-angry eyes.

"You wouldn't have me hollering your dandy name, with him only just clear of Ross's house? I'm not chasing trouble."

"Has Steve only just gone?"

"Sure. I waited for that before I came along."

The man moistened his lips. It was a curiously unpleasant operation. Then he came a step nearer.

"Well, Nita," he said, with a world of meaning in eyes and tone. "We're rid of him for two years—anyway."

The girl started. The flush in her cheeks deepened, and the angry light again leapt into her eyes.

"What d'you mean?" she cried.

The man laughed.

"Mean? Do you need to ask? Ain't you glad?"

"Glad? I—" Suddenly pallor had replaced the flush in the girl's cheeks, and a curious light shone in eyes which a moment before had been alight with swift resentment. "—I—don't know."

The man nodded confidently, and drew still closer.

"That's all right," he said. "I do."

CHAPTER IV

UNAGA

IT was the last of the night watch. The depths of the primeval forest were alive with sound, those sounds which are calculated to set the human pulse athrob. Steve Allenwood crouched over the fire. He was still, silent, and he squatted with his hands locked about his knees.

The fitful firelight only served to emphasize the intensity of surrounding darkness. It yielded little more than a point of attraction for the prowling, unseen creatures haunting the wild. The snow outside was falling silently, heavily, for it was late in the year, and October was near its close! Here there was shelter under the wide canopy which the centuries had grown.

As yet the falling temperature was still above zero. Later it would be different. The cap on the man's head was pressed low over his ears, and his summer buckskin shirt had been replaced by the furs which would stand between him and the fierce breath of winter during the long months to come. His eyes were wide. Every sense was alert. For all he was gazing into the fire, he was listening, always listening to those sounds which he dared not ignore for one single moment.

The sounds were many. And each had a meaning which he read with a sureness that was almost instinctive. The deep unease of the myriads of bare tree-trunks about

him, supporting their snow-laden canopy, told him of the burden which the pitiless northern heavens were thrusting upon them. It also told him of the strength of the breeze which was driving the banking snow outside. The not infrequent booming crash of a falling tree spoke of a burden already too great to bear. So with the splitting of an age-rotted limb torn from the parent trunk.

Of deeper significance, and more deadly, is the sound which never dies out completely. It is a sound as of falling leaves, pattering softly upon the underlay of rotting cones and dead pine needles. Its insistence is peculiar. There are moments when it is distant. And moments, again, when it is near, desperately near.

It is at times such as the latter that the man at the fire unlocks his hands. With a swift movement, he reaches down to the fire and seizes a blazing brand. For a moment a trail of fire arcs against the black depths of the forest and falls to the ground. Then, with a hasty scuttling, the sounds die away in the distance, and a fierce snarling challenge is flung from the safer depths.

The challenge is without effect. The man rises swiftly to his feet, and, a moment later, the smouldering firebrand is gathered up, and all signs of fire where it has fallen are stamped out. Again he returns to the comforting warmth to continue his watch, whilst his companions sleep on securely in their arctic, fur-lined bags.

But the threat is real and deadly. Woe betide the foolish human soul who ignores it, or fails to read it aright. The eyes of the forest are wide awake. They are everywhere watching. They are there, in pairs, merciless, savage eyes, only awaiting opportunity. It is the primeval forest world where man is no more than those other creatures who seek to support the life that is thrust upon them.

These things were only a few of the voiceless hauntings which never ceased. Steve and his companions knew them all by heart. Every sound, every cadence told its tale. Every danger, with which they were surrounded, was calculated to a fraction and left them undisturbed.

Slowly the power of the firelight lessened. For all the stirring and replenishing, the flickering blaze yielded before the steadily growing twilight, and presently it sulkily abandoned the unequal contest. The dawn had come.

It was sufficient. Steve rose from his seat and stretched himself. Then, moving over to the wood pile he replenished the fire and set the camp kettle to boil. After that he passed on to the two figures still sleeping under their furs.

Oolak was the first to reach full wakefulness, and he promptly crawled from his sleeping-bag. Steve's instructions were brief and to the point.

"Fix the dogs," he ordered. And Oolak grunted his simple acquiescence.

As Julyman broke from his spell of dreaming Steve indicated the camp kettle.

"I've set it to boil. I'll take a look outside," he said.

He passed on without waiting for reply and his way followed the track which the sled had left in the rotting underlay, where over night it had been laboriously hauled into the shelter of the woods.

His movements were vigorous. The bulk of his outer clothing robbed him of much of such height as he possessed, but it added to the natural appearance of muscular sturdiness which was always his. His mission was important, for on his accurate reading of the elemental conditions depended immediate movements, and safety or disaster for his expedition.

As he neared the break in the forest, through which

their course lay, the twilight gave before the light of day, and through the aisles of bare tree-trunks ahead he beheld the white carpet which night had laid. Nearly a foot of snow had fallen, and everywhere under its burden the foliage drooped dismally in the perfect morning light.

These things, however, were without serious concern. Steve knew that for the next seven months the earth would lie deep buried under its winter pall. That was the condition under which most of his work was carried on. It was the sunrise, and the wind, which must tell him the things he desired to know.

Passing beyond the shadowed aisles he moved out over the soft snow, where the crisp breeze swept down through the break. He was a few hundred yards from the summit of the high ridge over which, for miles, to the north and south, the primeval forest spread its mantle. It was a barrier set up and shutting off the view of the final stage of his journey; that final stage towards which he had laboured for so many weeks. He had reached so nearly the heart of Unaga, and beyond, somewhere towards the shores of Hudson's Bay lay that winter goal where he hoped to find the friendly shelter of the home of the seal-hunting Eskimo who peopled the regions.

He ploughed his way through the snow towards the summit of the ridge.

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For all his outward calm Steve Allenwood was deeply stirred. For all he knew the wide Northland, with its mystery, its harshnesses, the sight that met his gaze from the summit of the ridge was one that left him wondering, and amazed, and not a little overwhelmed.

The immensity of it all! The harsh, unyielding magnificence! The bitter breath from the north-east stung his cheeks with its fierce caresses. He felt like a man who

has stolen into the studio of a great artist and finds himself confronted with a canvas upon which is roughly outlined the masterly impression of a creation yet to be completed. It seemed to him as if he were gazing upon the bold, rough draft of the Almighty Creator's uncompleted work.

The blazing arc of the rising sun was lifting over the tattered skyline, and its light burnished the snow-crowned glacial beds to an almost blinding whiteness. As yet it only caught the hill tops within its range. The hollows, the shadowed woodlands, remained lost beneath the early morning mists. It gave the impression of gazing down upon one vast steaming lake, out of which was slowly emerging ridges of white-crested land chequered with masses of primeval forest.

In all directions it was the same; a hidden world having laboriously to free itself from the bondage of the mists.

The churning mists rolled on. They cleared for a moment at a point to let the sunlight shafts illuminate some sweep of glacial ice. Then they closed down again, swiftly, as though to hide once more those secrets inadvertently revealed. The sun rose higher. The movement of the mists became more rapid. They thinned. They deepened once more. And with every change the sense of urgent movement grew. It was like the panic movement of a beaten force. The all-powerful light of day was absorbing, draining the moisture-laden shadows, and reducing them to gossamer.

It was with the final passing of the mists that a sharp ejaculation broke from the watching man. It verily seemed to have been wrung from him. His gaze was fixed at a point of the broken skyline. A great cloud lay banked above the rising crest of the snowy barrier. It was stirring. It was lifting. Slowly. Reluctantly.

The moments passed. It was like the rising of the

curtain upon a wonderful stage picture. Unlike the mists the cloud did not disperse. It lifted up, up before the man's amazed eyes, and settled a dense dark mass to crown that which it had revealed.

"Gee!"

The startled monosyllable was thrilling with every emotion of wonder.

A spire towered over the serrated skyline. Its height was utterly beyond Steve's calculation. Its final peak was lost amidst the heavy cloud. Sheer up it rose. Sheer above its monstrous surroundings. It rose like the spire of some cathedral of Nature's moulding, and dwarfed the world about it. It was dark, dark, in contrast to the crystal splendour outspread, and frowned with the unyielding hue of the barren rock.

"Boss—look!"

It was the first intimation of Julyman's presence. Steve accepted it without question. He was wholly absorbed in what he beheld. The Indian was at his side pointing at the monstrous tower.

"Him Unaga—Unaga Spire. Julyman know. Him Father wise man. Him tell of Unaga Spire. Him hot. Him hot lak hell. Him all burn up snow—ice. Him burn up all thing. Come. It not good. Him Unaga Spire!"

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A wide declining expanse stretched out before them as Steve and Julyman swung along over the snow. They were following the track of a dog train, leaving behind them the added tracks of their own snow-shoes to mark the way. Ahead of them lay another short rise whose crest was dotted with timber bluffs. It was beyond this they hoped to discover the winter shelter they were seeking. Somewhere behind them the indomitable

Oolak, silent, enduring, was shepherding their own dog train over their tracks.

The end of the month had come and their fortunes were at a crisis. A thousand miles of territory had been covered since the early summer day when Steve had bade farewell to his wife and child.

The effort had been tremendous. Far more tremendous than these men knew. And the story of the journey, the endurance, the hardship of it, would have made an epic of man's silent heroism. With Steve each hardship, each difficulty encountered had been a matter of course. Accident was a thing simply to be avoided, and when avoidance was impossible then to be accepted without complaint. And these things had been so many.

Now the wide Northland had been traversed from west to east and they had crossed the fierce bosom of Unaga's plateau. The reality of it was no better and only little worse than had been anticipated. It had been a journey of hills, everlasting hills, and interminable primordial forests, with dreary breaks of open plains. Each season had brought its own troubles, with always lying ahead the deadly anticipation of the winter yet to come.

It was the thought of this, and the indications everywhere about them, that had spurred Steve to hunt down the sled track upon which they had miraculously fallen.

They moved on in silence for a long time. Such was the way of these men. The great silences had eaten into their bones. The life and labours of the trail would have been intolerable amidst the chatter of useless talk.

The rolling swing of their gait carried them swiftly to their vantage ground, and hope stirred Steve to give expression to his thoughts.

"It would be queer to find those fancy 'Sleeper Indians' of yours," he said.

Julyman cast a glance over his left shoulder in the

direction of the steely north. Somewhere back there far beyond his view stood the great Spire of Unaga, and the black cloud hovering about its crest. It had been left far, far behind them, but it still remained a memory.

"No Sleeper Indian man," he said decidedly. Then he added with a final shake of his head: "Oh no."

Steve laughed. It was not often these men laughed on the trail. Just now, however, the excitement of hope had robbed the white man of something of his habit.

"Guess your yarn didn't just locate them. Where d'you reckon they are?"

Julyman slackened his gait as they breasted the final rise where the sled track vanished over the brow of the hill. His dark, questioning eyes were turned enquiringly upon his boss, and he searched the smiling face that looked back at him out of its framing of heavy fur. He feared to be laughed at. He pointed at the northern horizon.

"Him—Unaga," was all he said.

Steve followed the direction of the mitted hand pointing northward, and the smile died out of his eyes. That strange Spire filled his memory still in spite of himself. Something of the Indian's awe communicated itself to him.

But he thrust it from him and gazed out ahead again, searching the tracks they were following.

"We'll find something, anyway," he said presently. "This track's not half a day old. There's folks beyond the rise. Say, maybe we can winter hereabouts, and work along the coast. The coast line's warmer. It never hits zero on the coast till you make inside the Arctic Circle. We'll get back to home next winter. It'll be good getting back to your squaws on Caribou, eh?"

There was a note in Steve's voice which did not fail to

impress itself on the Indian's keen understanding. He knew his boss was thinking of his own white squaw and the pretty blue eyes of the pappoose which made the father forget every trouble and concern when he gazed down into them. Oh, yes, Julyman understood. He understood pretty well every mood of his boss. And who should understand them if he did not? Men on the trail together learn to read each other like a book.

"Squaws him trash!" exclaimed the Indian. And he spat to emphasize his cynical opinion.

"Some squaws," corrected Steve.

Julyman glanced at him from the corners of eyes which had become mere slits before the biting drift of the wind.

"All squaw," he said doggedly. Then he went on. "Squaw him all smile. Him soft. Him mak dam fool of Indian man. Squaw no good—only mak pappoose, feed pappoose. Raise him. All the time squaw mak pappoose. Him not think nothin' more. Just pappoose. Indian man think all things. Him squaw only mak pappoose an'—trouble."

"Trouble?" Steve's smile was alight with humour.

The Indian nodded.

"All time," he said decidedly. "No man, no pappoose, then squaw him mak trouble all time. It all same. Him find man sure. All man dam fool. Squaw mak him dam fool. Julyman stand by teepee. Him tak rawhide. Him say, 'do so!' Squaw him do. Julyman mak long trail. Him not care. Him come back him find plenty much other squaw. So!"

The Indian's watchful eyes had turned again to the tracks ahead. But he had seen. The humour had completely vanished out of Steve's eyes. So had his smile. Julyman's purpose was not quite clear. He loved and revered his chief. He had no desire to hurt him. But

Steve knew that the man had been saying what he had said for his benefit.

"You're a damn scoundrel, Julyman," he said, and there was less than the usual tolerance in his tone.

The Indian shrugged under his furs.

"Julyman wise man," he protested. "All the time white man say, 'one squaw.' It good! So! It fine! Indian man say one—two—five—ten squaw. Then him not care little dam!"

Steve made no reply. The man's cynicism was sufficiently brutal to make it impossible to reply without heat. And Steve had no desire to quarrel with his chief lieutenant. Besides, he was deeply attached to the rascal. So they swung up the last sharp incline in the voiceless manner in which so much of their work was done.

It was Steve who reached the brow first, and it was his arm, and his voice that indicated the discoveries beyond.

"Right!" he exclaimed. "Look, Julyman," he went on pointing. "A lodge. A lodge of neches. And—see! What's that?" There was excitement in the tone of his question. "It's—a fort!" he cried, his eyes reflecting the excitement he could no longer restrain. "A—post! A white man's trading post! What in hell! Come on!"

He moved on impetuously, and in a moment the two men were speeding down the last incline.

The last recollection of the Indian's deplorable philosophy had passed from Steve's mind. His eyes were on the distant encampment. He had been prepared for some discovery. But never, in his wildest dreaming, had he anticipated a white man's trading post.

It was something amazing. As far as Steve could reckon they were somewhere within a hundred miles of the great inland sea. It might be thirty miles. It might be sixty. He could not tell. Far as the eye could see

there was little change from what they had been travelling over for weeks. Appalling wastes of snow, and hill, and forest, with every here and there a loftier rise supporting a glacial bed. There were watercourses. Oh, yes, rivers abounded in that wide, unknown land. But they were frozen deeply, and later would freeze doubtless to their very beds.

But here was a wide shallow valley with a high range of hill country densely forest clad forming its north-eastern boundary. The hither side was formed by the low rising ground over which they had just passed. The hollow passed away, narrowing more deeply to the south-east, and lost itself in the dark depths of a forest. To the north-west the valley seemed to wander on amidst a labyrinth of sharp hills, which, in the distance, seemed to grow loftier and more broken as they merged themselves into the range Steve believed supported the mysterious Spire of Unaga.

The point of deepest interest and wonder was that which lay in the heart of the valley less than three miles further on. Numberless small bluffs chequered the open and suggested the parentage of one which stood out amongst them, wide, and dark, and lofty. Here there was a long wavering line of low bush reaching out down the heart of the valley indicating the course of a river. It was on this river bank, snuggled against the fringe of the great pine bluff that a cluster of dome-roofed habitations were plainly visible.

But the wonder of all stood a short distance away to the right where the woods came down towards the river. It was a wide group of buildings of lateral logs, with log roofs, and surrounded by a stockade of similar material. The touch of the white man's hand was unmistakable. No race of northern Indians or Eskimo could have built such a place.

They sped on over the snow unconscious of the increase of their speed. And as they approached each man realized the same thought. There was no sign of life anywhere. There was not even a prowling dog to be seen searching amongst the refuse of the encampment.

As they drew nearer they failed to discover any addition to the solitary track they were following. It was curious. It was almost ominous. But its significance was lost in the thought that here at least was shelter for themselves against the real winter yet to come.

They reached the banks of the river. It was a good-sized creek frozen solid, and already deep buried under snow. Without a pause they crossed to the other side and broke their way through the scrubby snow-laden bush on the opposite bank.

"Hello!"

The two men came to an abrupt halt. They were confronting a small child of perhaps five or six years. He was clad in furs from head to foot. A pretty, robust, white-skinned child, wide-eyed, and smiling his frankly cordial greeting.

CHAPTER V

MARCEL BRAND

FOR a moment astonishment robbed Steve of speech. Julyman was, perhaps, less affected. He stood beside his boss grinning down at the apparition till his eyes were almost entirely hidden by their closing lids, and his copper skin was wrinkled into a maze of creases.

Steve's ultimate effort was a responsive, "Hello!"

It seemed to meet with the child's approval, for he came trustfully towards the strangers.

"Mummy's sick," he informed them, gazing smilingly up into the white man's face. "The Injuns is all asleep. Pop's all gone away. So's Uncle Cy. Gone long time. There's An-ina and me. That's all. I likes An-ina—only hers always wash me."

The whole story of the post was told. The direct childish mind had taken the short cut which maturity would probably have missed.

Steve had recovered himself, and he smiled down into the pretty, eager, up-turned face.

"What's your name, little man?" he asked kindly.

"Marcel," the boy returned, without the least shyness.

Steve stooped down into a squatting position, and held out his hands invitingly. There could be no mistaking his attitude. There could be no mistaking the appeal this lonely little creature made to his generous manhood.

"That all? Any other?"

The boy came confidently within reach of the outstretched arms, and, as the man's mitted hands closed about him, he held up his face for the expected caress. Steve bent his head and kissed the ready lips.

"'Es, Brand. Marcel Brand," the boy said in that slightly halting fashion of pronouncing unaccustomed words.

Steve looked up with a start. His eyes encountered the still grinning face of the scout.

"Do you hear that?" he demanded. "Marcel Brand. It's—it's the place we're chasing for. Gee! it's well nigh a miracle!"

Quite suddenly he released the child and stood up. Then he picked the little fellow up in his strong arms.

"Come on, old fellow," he said quickly. "We'll go right along up and see your Mummy."

And forthwith he started for the frowning stockade under its mantle of snow.

Once in Steve's arms the child allowed an arm to encircle the stranger's neck. It was an action of complete abandonment to the new friendship, and it thrilled the man. It carried him back over a thousand miles of territory and weary toil to a memory of other infant arms and other infant caresses.

"'Es. I likes you," the boy observed as they moved on. "Who's you?"

Half confidences were evidently not in his calculation. He had readily given his, and now he looked for the natural return.

Steve laughed delightedly.

"Who's I? Why, my name's Steve. Steve Allenwood. 'Uncle' Steve. And this is Julyman. He's an Indian, and very good man. And we like little boys. Don't we, Julyman?"

The grin on the scout's face was still distorting his

unaccustomed features as he moved along beside his boss.

"Oh, yes. Julyman, him likes 'em—plenty, much."

"Why ain't you asleep?" demanded the boy abruptly addressing the scout and in quite a changed tone. His smile, too, had gone.

Steve noted the change. He understood it. White and colour. This child had been bred amongst Indians, and his parents were white. It was always so. Even in so small a child the distinction was definite. He replied for Julyman, while the Indian only continued to grin.

"Julyman only sleeps at night," he said.

But Marcel pointed at the domed huts which looked so like a collection of white ant heaps.

"All Indians sleeps. All winter. My Pop says so. So does Uncle Cy. They sleeps all the time. Only An-ina don't sleep. 'Cep' at night. I doesn't sleep 'cep' at night. Indians does."

The white man and Indian exchanged glances. Julyman's was triumphant. Steve's was negatively smiling. He looked up into the child's face which was just above his level.

"These Indians sleep all winter?" he questioned.

"'Es, them sleeps. My Pop says they eats so much they has to sleep. An'," he went on eagerly, stumbling over his words, "they's so funny when they's sleep. They makes dreffful noises, an' my Pop says they's snores. He says they's dreaming all funny things 'bout fairies, an' seals, an' hunting, an' all the things thems do's. They's wakes up sometimes. But sleeps again. Why does they sleep? Why does them eat so much? It's wolves eats till they bursts, isn't it, Uncle Steve?"

Steve pressed the little man closer to him. That "Uncle Steve" so naturally said warmed his heart to a passionate degree. The little fellow's mother was sick,

and he knew that his father and Uncle Cy were dead; murdered somewhere out in that cold vastness. What had this bright happy little life to look forward to on the desolate plateau of the Sleeper Indians.

"Wolves are great greedy creatures," he said. "They eat up everything they can get. They're real wicked."

"So's Injuns then."

Steve laughed at the childish logic, as the little man rattled on.

"I's hunt wolves when I grows big. I hunts 'em like Uncle Cy, an' seals, too. I kills 'em. I kills everything wicked. That's what my Pop says. He says, good boys kills everything bad, then God smile, an' all the people's happy."

They reached the stockade which the practised eye of Steve saw to be wonderfully constructed. Not only was its strength superlative, but it was loopholed for defence, and he knew that such defences were not against the great grey wolves of the forest or any other creatures of the wild. They were defences against attack by human marauders, and he read into them the story of hostile Indians, and all those scenes which had doubtless been kept carefully hidden from little Marcel's eyes.

Furthermore he realized that the post was of comparatively recent construction. Perhaps it was five or ten years old. It could not have been more. It entirely lacked that appearance of age which green timbers acquire so readily under the fierce Northern storms. And it set him wondering at the nature of the lure which had brought men of obvious means, with wife and child, to the inhospitable plateau of Unaga.

He set the boy on the ground while he removed his snow-shoes. Then, hand in hand, the little fellow led him round to the gateway which opened out in full view of the valley.

It was a wide enclosure, and its ordering and construction appealed to the man of the trail. There was thought and experience in every detail of it. There was, too, the obvious expenditure of money and infinite labour. The great central building stood clear of everything else. It was long and low, with good windows of glass, and doors as powerful as human hands could make them. To the practical eyes of the Northern man it was clearly half store and half dwelling house, built always with an eye to a final defence.

Beyond this there were a number of outbuildings. Some were of simple Indian construction. But three of them, a large barn, and two buildings that suggested store-houses, were like the house, heavily built of logs.

But he was given little time for deep investigation, for little Marcel eagerly dragged him towards the door of the store. To the man there was something almost pathetic in the child's excitement and joy in his new discovery. His childish treble silenced the bristling dogs that leapt out at them in fierce welcome. And his imperious command promptly reduced them to snuffing suspiciously at the furs of the scout and the white man whom they seemed to regard with considerable doubt. He chattered the whole time, stumbling over his words in his eager excitement. He was endeavouring to impart everything he knew to this newly found friend, and, in the course of the brief interval of their approach to the house Steve learned all the dogs' names, their achievements, what little Marcel liked most to eat, and how he disliked being washed by An-ina, and how ugly his nurse was, and how his father was the cleverest man in the world, and how he made long journeys every winter to look for something he couldn't find.

It was all told without regard for continuity or purpose. It seemed to Steve as if the little fellow was loosing a long

pent tide held up from lack of companionship till the bursting point had been reached.

As they came to the house, however, a sudden change came over the scene. The door abruptly opened, and a tall, handsome squaw, dressed in the clothes of rougher civilization, stood regarding them unsmilingly. To his surprise she was not only beautiful but quite young.

The boy's chatter ceased instantly and his face fell. One small mitted hand approached the corner of his pretty mouth, and he regarded the woman with quaint, childish reproach. It was only for a moment, however. With a sudden brightening of hope he turned and gazed up appealingly at his new friend.

"Don't let hers wash us, Uncle Steve," he implored.

. . . . . .

Deep distress looked out of Steve's steady eyes. He was gazing at a wreck of beautiful womanhood lying on the bed. There was no doubt of the beauty of this mother of little Marcel. It was there in every line of the pale, hollow cheeks, in her clear, broad brow. In the great, soft grey eyes which were hot with fever as they gazed at him out of their hollow settings. Then the abundant dark hair, parted now in the centre, Indian fashion, and flooding the pillow with its masses. It was dull and lustreless, but all its beauty of texture remained.

She had summoned him at once to her sick room through An-ina. And in her greeting had briefly told him of the trouble which had befallen her.

"Maybe you'll think it queer my receiving you this way," she said, in a tired voice, "but I can't just help myself. You see, I can't move hand or foot." Then a pitiful smile crept into the wistful eyes. "It happened two weeks ago. Oh, those two weeks. I was felling saplings with An-ina in the woods out back. Maybe a

woman can't do those things right. Anyway, one fell on me, and it just crushed me to the ground, and held me pinned there. I thought I was dead. But I wasn't. I was only broken. Maybe I'll die here—soon. An-ina got me clear and carried me home. And now—why, if it wasn't for my little Marcel I'd be glad—so glad to be rid of all the pain."

The note of despair, the tragedy in the brief recital were overwhelming. The full force of them smote Steve to the heart, and left him incapable of expression, beyond that which looked out of his eyes. Words would have been impossible. He realized she was on her deathbed. It required only the poor creature's obvious intense sufferings to tell him that. It was a matter of perhaps hours before little Marcel would be robbed of his second parent.

The brief daylight was pouring in through the double glass window of the room. It lit an interior which had only filled him with added wonder at these folks, and the guiding hand which inspired everything he beheld. The furnishing of the room was simple enough. But it was of the manufacture of civilization, and he could only guess at the haulage it had required to bring it to the heart of Unaga. Then there was distinct taste in the arrangement of the room. It was the taste of a woman of education and refinement, and one who must have been heart and soul with her husband, and the enterprise he was embarked upon.

An-ina had left him there to talk with the mother of those things which it was her care should not reach the ears of little Marcel.

Steve told her at once that he was a police officer, and that he was on a mission of investigation into the—he said "disappearance"—of Marcel Brand, who, he explained, was supposed to be a trader, with his partner

Cyrus Allshore, somewhere in the direction north of Seal Bay in the Unaga country. He told her that he had travelled one thousand miles overland to carry out the work, and that something little short of a miracle had brought him direct to her door.

And the woman had listened to him with the eagerness of one who has suddenly realized a ray of hope in the blackness of her despair.

After his brief introduction she breathed a deep sigh and her eyes closed under the pain that racked her broken body.

"Then my message got through," she said, almost to herself. "Lupite must have reached Seal Bay." Then her eyes opened and she spoke with added effort. "I didn't dare to hope. It was all I could do," she explained. "Lupite said he'd get through or die. He was a good and faithful neche. I—I wonder what's happened him since. He's not got back, and—the others have all deserted me. There's no one here now but An-ina, and my little boy, and," she added bitterly, "what's left of me. Oh, God, will it never end! This pain. This dreadful, dreadful pain."

After a moment of troubled regard, while he watched the cold dew of agony break upon her brow, Steve ventured his reply.

"Yes. It must have got through, I guess," he said. "It must have reached the Indian Department at Ottawa. They sent it right along to the man at the Allowa Reserve where I'm stationed, and communicated with the police. That's how I received my instructions. They said your husband was supposed to be—murdered. And his partner, too."

"I put that in my letter," the woman said quickly. "I just had to. You see—" she broke off. But after a brief hesitation she went on. "But I don't know. I

don't know anything that's happened really. He went away on a trip eighteen months ago, with Cy. It was to Seal Bay, with trade. He ought to have been back that fall. I haven't had a word since. I've been eighteen months here alone with An-ina, and—these Sleepers. He might have met with accident. But it's more likely murder. These Sleepers suspected. They were frightened he'd found out. You see, this stuff—this Adresol—is sacred to them. They would kill anyone who found out where they get it from."

A spasm of pain contorted her drawn face and again her eyes closed under the agony. She re-opened them at the sound of Steve's voice.

"Will you tell me, ma'm?" he said.

Steve's manner was gentle. His sympathy for this stricken creature was real and deep. She was a woman, suffering and alone in a God-forsaken land. The thought appalled him.

For some moments his invitation remained without response. The woman lay there unmoving, inert. Only was life in her hot eyes, and the trifling rise and fall of the bed covering as she breathed. Obviously she was considering. Perhaps she was wondering how much she had a right to tell this officer. She was completely without guidance. If her husband had been alive doubtless her lips would have remained sealed. But he was not there, and she knew not what had become of him. Then there was little Marcel, and she knew that when she left that bed it would be only for a cold grave on this bleak plateau of Unaga.

Steve waited with infinite patience. He felt it to be a moment for patience. Suddenly she began to talk in a rapid, feverish way.

"Yes, yes," she cried. "I must tell you now, and quickly. Maybe when you've heard it all you'll help

me. There's no one else can help me. You see, it's my boy—my little boy. He's all I have in the world—now. He's the sun and light of my life. It's the thought of him alone, with only An-ina, in this terrible land that sets me well-nigh crazy. The police. I wonder. Would they look after him? Could you take him back with you when I'm dead? Do they look after poor orphans, poor little bits of life like him? Or is he too small a thing in the work they have to do? I pray God you'll take him out of this when I'm dead."

Steve strove to keep a steady tone. The appeal was heartrending.

"Don't you fret that way, ma'm," he cried earnestly. "If those things happen you reckon are going to, I'll see that no harm, I can help, comes to him. He's just a bright little ray of light, and I guess God didn't set him on this earth to leave him helpless in such a country as this."

A world of relief in the mother's eyes thanked him.

"I—I—" she began, and the man promptly broke in.

"You needn't try to thank me . . ." Steve's manner was gravely kind. "Maybe when you've told me things I'll be able to locate your husband. And maybe he isn't dead."

The woman's eyes denied him hopelessly.

"He's dead—sure," she said. "Whatever's happened he's—dead. Say, listen, I'd best try and tell you all from the start," she went on, with renewed energy. "It's the only way. And it's a straight story without much shame in it. My husband, Marcel Brand, is a Dane, with French blood in his veins. He's a great chemist, who learned everything the Germans could teach him. He absorbed their knowledge, but not their ways. He was a good and great man, whose whole idea of life was to care for his wife and child, and expend all

his knowledge to help the world of suffering humanity. It was for that reason that seven years ago he realized all he possessed, and, taking Cy Allshore as a partner, came up here."

"To help suffering humanity?"

Incredulity found expression almost before Steve was aware of it.

"Yes, I know. It sounds crazy," the sick woman went on. "But it isn't. Nothing Marcel ever did was crazy. All his life he has been studying drugs, and his studies have taken him into all sorts of crazy corners of the world. Thibet, Siberia, Brazil, Tropical Africa, India, and now—Unaga. It was he who discovered Adrisol, that wonderful, priceless drug, which if it could only be obtained in sufficient quantities would be the greatest boon to humanity for—as he used to say himself—all time. Oh, I can't tell you about that," she exclaimed wearily, "guess it would need someone cleverer than I. But it's that brought us here, and kept us here for seven years. And maybe we'd have spent years more. You see, Marcel was years hunting over the world for the stuff growing in quantities. It was a chance story about these Indians he'd listened to that brought him here first, and when he discovered they were using the stuff, he believed it was the hand of Providence guiding him. With the use of it he found the Indians hibernated each winter, and yet remained healthy, robust creatures, retaining their faculties unimpaired, and living to an extreme old age."

"I'd heard of the 'Sleepers,' ma'm," Steve admitted. "But," he added, with a half smile, "I couldn't just believe the yarn."

"Oh, it's surely real," the woman returned promptly. "You can see for yourself. We call them the Ant Indians, because of their queer huts. They're all around

the fort, and they're sleeping now, with their food and their dope near by for each time they wake. Yes, you can see it all for yourself. They look like dead things."

After another agonized spasm she took up her story more rapidly, as though fearing lest her strength should fail and she would be left without sufficient time to finish it.

"When Marcel came here he found himself up against tremendous difficulties. Oh, it wasn't the climate. It wasn't a thing to do with the country. It was the Indians themselves. He found they held the drug sacred, and the secret of their supply something more precious than life itself. It's the whole key to his death. Oh, I know it. I am sure, sure. He found that these mostly peaceful creatures were ready to defend their secret to the uttermost. No money could buy it from them, and they violently resented Marcel's attempts in that direction. For awhile the position was deadly, as maybe the defences we had to set up outside have told you. Marcel had blundered, and it was only after months of trouble he remedied it, and came to an understanding with these folk. They were won over by the prospect of trade, and agreed to trade small quantities of weed provided we would make no attempt to look for the source of their supply."

"Maybe we're to be blamed," she hurried on, "I don't know. Anyway, Marcel reckoned he was working for the good of humanity. He saw his opportunity in that agreement. The Indians were satisfied. Their good nature re-asserted itself, and all went smoothly with our trade in seals and the weed. But our opportunity lay in the winter. In the sleep-time of this folk. Maybe the Indians reckoned their secret was safe in winter. The storming, the cruel terror of winter which they dared not face would surely be too much for any white man.

Maybe they thought that way, but if they did they were wrong. Marcel determined to use their sleep time to discover the secret he needed. He and Cy were ready for any chances. They would stand for nothing. That was their way. So, with our own boys, they made the long trail every winter."

"But they failed. Oh, yes, they failed." The woman sighed. "Sometimes it was climate beat them. Sometimes it wasn't. Anyway they never found the growing stuff. They never got a clue to its whereabouts. Maybe it was all buried up in snow. We always reckoned on that. The winter passed, and with each year that slipped away the chances seemed to recede farther and farther. Then all of a sudden the Indians got suspicious again. That was three years ago. I just don't know how it happened. Maybe one of our boys gave it away. Anyhow they turned sulky. That was the first sign. Then they refused to trade their weed. Then we knew the trouble had come. But Marcel was ready for them. He was ready for most things. He refused to trade their seals if they refused their weed. It was a bad time, but we finally got through. You see they needed our trade, once having begun it, and in the end Marcel managed to patch things up. But they frankly told us they knew of our winter expeditions to rob them, and, if they were continued, they would kill us all, and burn up the post. Well, things settled down after that and trade went on. But it wasn't the same. The Indians became desperately watchful, and for one whole winter half of them didn't sleep. I knew trouble was coming.

"Then came the time when Marcel had to make a trip to Seal Bay. He'd postponed it as long as he could. But our stuff had accumulated, and we had to get rid of it, and so, at last, he was forced to go. The post was well fortified, as you've seen, and we were liberally sup-

plied with means of defence. Lupite was faithful, and I could rely on my other fighting neches. So Marcel and Cy set out, and—well, there's nothing more to tell," she said wearily. "They've both disappeared, vanished. And they should have been back more than a year ago. In desperation I sent the message by Lupite. He's not returned either, and, one by one, all our own Indians have deserted me. Oh," she went on passionately, "it's no accident that's happened. Marcel has been killed, murdered by these miserable folk, and all his years of work have gone for nothing. Why they haven't killed me and little Marcel, I can't think. Maybe they think we're of no account without Marcel. Maybe they find our store useful. For I've carried on the trade ever since Marcel went. But now my supplies are running out and when the Indians wake up and find that is so—but I shall be already dead. Poor little Marcel. But—but you won't let that happen, will you? It—it is surely God's hand that has sent you here now."

The woman's voice died out in a sob, and her eyes closed upon the tears gathered in them. It was the final weakening of her courage. For all its brevity, for all it was told in such desperate haste, the story lost nothing of its appeal, nothing of its pathos.

It left Steve feeling more helpless than he had ever felt in his life. At that moment he would have given all he possessed for the sound of the deep, cheerful voice of Ian Ross in that room of death.

Mrs. Brand's eyes remained closed, and her breathing laboured under her failing strength. She had put forth a tremendous effort, and the reaction was terrible. The ghastly hue of her cheeks and lips terrified Steve. He dreaded lest at that moment the final struggle was actually taking place.

He waited breathlessly. He had risen from his seat.

The feeble throb of the pulse was visibly beating at the woman's temples. He knew he could do nothing, and, presently, as the eyes showed no sign of re-opening, he turned, and stole out to summon An-ina.

CHAPTER VI

AN-INA

THE brief daylight had nearly passed. Accompanied by its fiery Satellites the sun was lolling moodily to its rest. Steve was searching the near distance for a sight of Oolak and the dog train, which should shortly arrive at the post. There was deep reflection in his whole attitude, in the keen lines of his strong face, in the far-off look in his steady eyes. Beside him little Marcel, in his warmth-giving bundle of furs, was emulating the attitude of his new "uncle." He, too, was searching the distance. He, too, was still and silent. Perhaps, even, in his childish way, he was striving to read the pages of the mystery book, which the bleak, snowbound prospect represented.

Beyond the low ridge of crystal whiteness, less than three miles distant, the land rose steadily, ridge on ridge. It looked like a series of giant steps blotched and chequered with dark patches of forest which contained so many secrets hidden from the eyes of man. As the distance gained the crystal of it all mellowed softly till a deep purple dominated the whole prospect.

The wintering sun had almost completed its course. At this season of the year it simply passed low above the horizon towards the west, like a rolling ball of fire, until, weary of its effort, it submerged again beyond the broken line of the hills. And each day that passed, its course dropped lower and lower.

It was a stern enough picture for all winter had not yet finally closed its doors upon the dying season. And none could know better the meaning of its frowning than Steve.

"Wot's us looking at, Uncle Steve?"

The childish treble piped its demand without the boy withdrawing his gaze from the grim picture of winter's approach.

In a moment Steve's pre-occupation vanished. He smiled down on the fascinating little bundle of furs as he replied.

"Oolak, old fellow, Oolak, and Uncle Steve's outfit. Guess he's got uncle's bed, and all his food."

"Wot food?"

Interest in such a subject superceded all interest in the sunset. Little Marcel's eyes were eagerly enquiring as they gazed up into those of his new found friend.

"Why, there's some frozen black-tail deer. Maybe there's a jack rabbit or so. Then I guess there's biscuit, and coffee, and tea, and maybe even sugar."

The boy nodded appreciatively.

"I likes 'em," he said. Then after a moment. "I likes plenty sugar. There's sugar at the store. My Mummy, hers keep it for me cos I likes 'em."

Steve understood. He interpreted the announcement in his own fashion. He knew that stores were running short, and that those others, those two devoted women, were hoarding the last remains of their sugar for the little life that needed it.

He turned abruptly towards the horizon again. Perhaps he did not desire the eyes of the child to witness the feeling he had stirred.

He need have had no fear. At that moment the boy's treble shrilled with excitement.

"Look, Uncle Steve!" he cried pointing. "Him's

Oolak. Wiv dogs, an' sled, an' food, an' everything. Him's coming down——"

But he waited for no more. He waited for no reply. He waited for no guiding mandate. He raced off across the frozen surface of the snow as fast as his jolly little legs could carry him. It seemed as if he considered anything or anyone belonging to "Uncle Steve" to be also part of his small life, and was entitled to all the welcome he could give.

Steve watched the little fellow with a tender smile. He was so small, so full of happy life and engaging simplicity. Then he had such a wonderful picture face, with its fringe of curling hair which thrust its way out from under the thick, arctic helmet of fur which was part of his outer clothing. For a moment, as he bundled over the snow like a brown woolly ball, Steve wondered how he managed it, so encased was his small figure in sealskin. But he did, and his high-pitched greeting to the man with the dog train floated back upon the still, cold air as he floundered farther and farther away.

"Hello!—hello!—hello!"

The greeting came back at intervals. And Steve wondered at the feelings of the silent Oolak when he heard that voice, and saw that baby figure sprinting and wobbling over the snow towards him.

"Missis gone—dead."

"Gone—dead!"

Steve turned with a start. He was looking into the handsome face of the squaw, An-ina, whose words he had echoed.

"Missis all gone—dead!" the squaw repeated with a solemn inclination of the head.

But the re-affirmation was unneeded. Full confirmation was in her wide dark eyes, which were full of every grievous emotion short of tears. Tears were something

of which her stoic Indian nature was incapable. But Steve knew well enough the weight of grief which lay behind the stricken expression which looked out of the enveloping hood of the woman's tunic of seal.

For a moment he gazed into An-ina's face in helpless silence. For the moment the tragedy of the whole thing left him groping. He knew this woman had come to him seeking guidance. In that moment of disaster he felt that the destiny of little Marcel and his devoted nurse had been flung into his hands.

"Come," he said with swift decision. "We'll get right back—to her."

. . . . . .

Steve was at the bedside. He was bending low over the still, calm figure, so straight, so rigid under the blanket covering. He was reading for himself, and in his own way, the brief account of those last moments when her spirit had yielded before those other overwhelming powers it had been impossible to resist.

Every disfiguring line of suffering had passed out of the beautiful, youthful face. For all the marble coldness which had taken possession of it Steve realized something of the splendid, smiling, courageous womanhood which had struggled so recklessly in support of the man for whom she had given up her life. And the full force of the tragedy of it all found a deep echo of pitying admiration in his heart. It seemed to him that the hand of Providence had fallen hard, and, in his human understanding, with more than questionable justice.

His examination completed he turned to the dusky creature at his side.

"I guess her sufferings are over—sure. Her poor soul's gone to join her man, and the boy's just—alone."

The squaw's dark eyes were soft with that velvet look

so peculiar to the Indian woman in moments of deep emotion.

"Maybe it best so," she said, in a manner which bespoke long association with white folk. "Him good woman. Him suffer much—so much. Poor—poor Missis. It not him fault. Oh, no. Him think all the time for her man, an' little Marcel. Oh, yes. Not think nothing else all time. This devil man come. Him kill her man. She not know. Poor Missis. She not think. Only so she please her man. So this devil man kill her man. So."

"What d'you mean?"

The man's gaze was compelling. Its steady light searched the soft eyes of the squaw. The woman withstood his gaze unflinchingly. Then she suddenly bent across, and drew the coverlet up, and tenderly hid the face of the dead. Then she looked up again into Steve's face.

"Come," she said quietly. "I tell you."

Without waiting for reply she led the way out of the room into the store beyond, with its bare counter, and shelves, and bins so meagrely supplied. Steve followed without a word. He had suddenly realized that as yet he knew only a part of the story of these people. There was more to be told.

The store displayed much the same purpose and care which everything else about the work of Marcel Brand revealed. The completeness of it all must have been surprising, had not Steve understood that the chemist had come here to carry his life's work to its logical completion. There were signs everywhere of capacity, and unstinted expenditure of money. But the haulage of it all. The thought was always in Steve's mind. The great stove in the corner of the long, low room. The carpentered shelvings, and drawers, and cupboards.

The counter, too, no makeshift barrier set up for the purposes of traffic, but with every sign of skilled workmanship about it. He felt certain that all these things must have been borne up the slopes of the great table-land, hauled overland, or by water, from the workshops of civilization.

Habit was strong and An-ina moved at once to the great stove radiating its pleasant warmth. Steve took up his position opposite her.

The squaw began at once. She had nothing to conceal from this man who represented the law of the white men. Besides, was she not thinking of the boy who had stolen so closely into her mother heart?

"An-ina not say to Missis all," she said, in her simple way. "Oh, no. Missis much afraid. Much suffer. Him sick—much sick. No man—then all gone. She 'fraid. She all break up her heart. Marcel not come. Why? Why? An-ina know. She hear from Indian man. All Indian man know. Marcel him all killed dead. Indian man not kill him. Oh, no. Cy Allshore him kill him. Marcel him kill Cy too. Both kill each one. Oh, yes. Cy devil man. Cy think him kill up Marcel. Then him have Missis—have all things. Oh, yes. Indian man know. Indian man find both, all killed dead. Indian man tell An-ina. An-ina say no tell Missis. Maybe she all kill dead—too. Yes? An-ina love Missis. Love her much. She no hurt Missis. So she not say. Oh, no."

The searching eyes of Steve never left the woman's dusky face for a moment. They were boring their way to pierce the unemotional exterior for the truth that lay behind.

"Say, just stop right there," he commanded. "I need to get this right. You reckon this feller Cy—Cy Allshore was out for plunder—murder. You guess

he kind of loved your Missis, and she didn't know. He reckoned to kill Marcel, and steal all this, and—his wife. That so?"

"Sure. That so."

"How d'you know?"

"An-ina see. An-ina have two eyes. She see all thing. Oh, yes."

"Tell me."

"How An-ina tell? She not know. She woman. She see. That all. Cy him hard. Him have bad eye for woman. Him think money all time. Him say, 'An-ina you good squaw.' Him say, 'Cy have no squaw. Cy like squaw.' An-ina say, no! She know. Then him hate An-ina. Him hate An-ina plenty, big. An-ina say nothing. She not 'fraid. Cy know she maybe kill him. Then him talk much with Missis. An-ina watch. Yes. Missis not know. Him good woman. An-ina know. Cy bad. An-ina think her mak big talk with Marcel. Her say much. No. Her not mak big talk. Marcel him kill Cy. Then all thing here—no good. Oh, yes. So An-ina say nothing. So him Cy an' Marcel go long trail. Marcel him not think nothin'. Him dream—dream. All time dream. Cy think bad all time.

"So." An-ina shrugged expressively. "Much long time. No Cy. No Marcel. Then Indian man mak big talk. Him say Indian man come by the big water. What you call him?"

"Hudson's Bay?"

"No, no. Not so big water."

"Chesterfield Inlet?"

The woman's eyes cleared of their perplexity.

"So. Chest-fiel' In-let. Him big water. Indian man come with much seal. Him mak camp. Bimeby him mak big trail for Unaga. Then him find him trail.

Cy an' Marcel. Him follow him trail, an' bimeby him come big, deep place. Cy an' Marcel, all gone—dead. Him dogs all gone—dead. An' wolves eat up all flesh. Oh yes."

"How did they recognize the bones?"

"Him sled, him outfit. All 'Sleeper.' Indian man know."

"And you reckon Cy Allshore killed Marcel—murdered him?"

There was a sharpness in Steve's demand that suggested doubt. He did not doubt the woman's story. It was her assertion that Cy had murdered his partner. He saw no evidence for her assumption. He felt that she had given run to her own personal feelings against the man.

"That so. I tell you," An-ina returned composedly. She read his doubt and understood. "I not lie. Oh, no. Indian man wise. Sleeper man wise. Not bad. No. They find him bones. All eat clean. They see big place. They look an' look. No fall. Oh, no. No break 'em all up. No. Him say Marcel wise man. Cy wise man. Not care for wolf. Oh, no. So him look much. Him take him bone an' look. Him find him head—two. Maybe Marcel—maybe Cy. Him find him hole. Little hole—big hole. Same like each. Then him find gun. Two much little gun. Two big gun. Little gun him both shoot. Two time—three time. Him say big fight—plenty. So. It easy. Oh, yes. Marcel him no fight plenty. Oh, no. Him so as brother with Cy. Cy him not so. An-ina know. Cy him steal, steal, so," An-ina bent her lithe body in an attitude of stealing upon a victim. "Then him little gun go—one! Marcel know. Him quick like lightning. Him brave—much brave. Then him little gun go—one. So. Both all kill up—dead."

For all the broken way of her talk, An-ina carried conviction. She knew both men. And her woman's heart and mind had read Cy Allshore to the dregs of what she believed was an infamous heart. Steve knew the danger of accepting her story without reserve. He was convinced of her sincerity. It would have been impossible to doubt. But——

The sound of little Marcel's piping voice reached them from the outside. Steve turned and glanced out of the window. Oolak was bringing in his train, with its five powerful dogs. Julyman with a club was busy, with little Marcel's assistance, beating off the ferocious welcome of dogs of the post.

For a moment he watched the boy's amazing efforts. Then as the tumult subsided he turned again to the patient woman awaiting his verdict.

"You're a good woman, An-ina," he said simply. "You've told me the whole thing as you see it. Well, I guess I can't ask more. Anyway I'm camping here for the winter, an' during that time I'll need to wake some of these 'sleepers.' I've got to get out and see what happened at that 'big place.' Later on, when the snow goes, why—Say, I guess there isn't a thing to keep you and little Marcel around here—now."

CHAPTER VII

THE HARVEST OF WINTER

STEVE was confronted with six months of desperate winter on the plateau of Unaga. It was an outlook that demanded all the strength of his simple faith. He was equal to the tasks lying before him, but not for one moment did he underestimate them.

For all the harshness of the life which claimed him Steve's whole nature was imbued with a saneness of sympathy, a deep kindliness of spirit that left him master of himself under every emotion. The great governing factor in his life was a strength of honest purpose. A purpose, in its turn, prompted by his sense of right and justice, and those things which have their inspiration in a broad generosity of spirit. So it was that under all conditions his conscience remained at peace.

It was supported by such feelings that he faced the tasks which the desperate heart of Unaga imposed upon him. He had the care of an orphaned child, he had the care of that child's Indian nurse, and the lives and well-being of his own two men charged up against him. He also had the investigations which he had been sent to make, and furthermore, there was his own life to be preserved for the woman he loved, and the infant child of their love, waiting for his return a thousand miles away. The work was the work of a giant rather than a man; but never for one moment did his confidence fail him.

The days following the arrival at the post were urgent. They were days of swift thought and prompt action. The open season was gone, and the struggle for existence might begin without a moment's warning. Steve knew. Everyone knew. That is, everyone except little Marcel.

The boy accepted every changing condition without thought, and busied himself with the preparations of his new friends. It had no significance for him that all day long the forest rang with the clip of the felling axe. Neither did the unceasing work of the buck-saw, as it ploughed its way through an endless stream of sapling trunks, afford him anything beyond the joy of lending his assistance. Then, too, the morning survey of the elemental prospect, when his elders searched the skies, fearing and hoping, and grimly accepting that which the fates decreed, was only one amongst his many joys. It was all a great and fascinating game, full of interest and excitement for a budding capacity which Steve was quick to recognize.

But the child's greatest delight was the moment when "Uncle Steve" invited him to assist him in discovering the economic resources of his own home. As the examination proceeded Steve learned many things which could never have reached him through any other source. He obtained a peep into the lives of these people through the intimate eyes of the child, and his keen perception read through the tumbling, eager words to the great truths of which the child was wholly unaware. And it was a story which left him with the profoundest admiration and pity for the dead man who was the genius of it all.

Not for one moment did Steve permit a shadow to cross the child's sunny, smiling face. From the first moment when the responsibility for Marcel's little life had fallen into his hands his mind was made up. By every artifice

the boy must be kept from all knowledge of the tragedy that had befallen him. When he asked for his mother he was told that she was so sick that she could not be worried. This was during the first two days. After that he was told that she had gone away. She had gone away to meet his father, and that when she came back she would bring his "pop" with her. A few added details of a fictitious nature completely satisfied, and the child accepted without question that which his hero told him.

He was permitted to see nothing of the little silent cortège that left the post late on the second night. He saw nothing of the grief-laden eyes of An-ina as she followed the three men bearing their burden of the dead mother, enclosed in a coffin made out of the packing cases with which the fort was so abundantly supplied. He had seen the men digging in the forest earlier in the day, and had been more than satisfied when "Uncle Steve" assured him they were digging a well. Later on he would discover the great beacon of stones which marked the "well." But, for the moment, while the curtain was being rung down on the tragedy of his life, he was sleeping calmly, and dreaming those happy things which only child slumbers may know.

Good fortune smiled on the early efforts at the fort. For ten days the arch-enemy withheld his hand. For ten days the weary sun was dragged from its rest by the evil "dogs" which seemed to dominate its movements completely. But each day their evil eyes grew more and more portentious and threatening as they watched the human labourers they seemed to regard with so much contempt.

Then came the change. It was the morning of the eleventh day. The "dogs" had hidden their faces and the weary sun remained obscured behind a mass of grey

cloud. The crisp breeze which had swept the valley with its invigorating breath had died out, and the world had suddenly become threateningly silent.

A few great snowflakes fluttered silently to the ground. Steve was at the gateway of the stockade, and his constant attendant was beside him in his bundle of furs. The man's eyes were measuring as they gazed up at the grey sky. Little Marcel was wisely studying, too.

"Maybe us has snow," he observed sapiently at last, as he watched the falling flakes.

"Yes. I guess we'll get snow."

Steve smiled down at the little figure beside him.

"Wot makes snow, Uncle Steve?" the boy demanded.

"Why, the cold, I guess. It just freezes the rain in the clouds. And when they get so heavy they can't stay up any longer, why—they just come tumbling down and makes folk sit around the stove and wish they wouldn't."

"Does us wish they wouldn't?"

"'Most all the time."

The child considered deeply. Then his face brightened hopefully.

"Bimeby us digs, Uncle Steve," he said. "Boy likes digging."

Steve held out a hand and Marcel yielded his.

"Boy'll help 'Uncle Steve,' eh?"

"I's always help Uncle Steve."

The spontaneity of the assurance remained unanswerable.

Steve glanced back into the enclosure. Then his hand tightened upon the boy's with gentle pressure.

"Come on, old fellow. We'll get along in, and make that stove, and—wish it wouldn't."

He led the way back to the house.

The snowfall grew in weight and density. Silent, still,

the world of Unaga seemed to have lost all semblance of life. White, white, eternal white, and above the heavy grey of an overburdened sky. Solitude, loneliness, desperately complete. It was the silence which well nigh drives the human brain to madness. From minutes to hours; from inches to feet. Day and night. Day and night. Snow, snow all the time, till the tally of days grew, and the weeks slowly passed. It almost seemed as if Nature, in her shame, were seeking to hide up the sight of her own creation.

For three silent weeks the snow continued to fall without a break. Then it ceased as abruptly as it had begun, leaving the fort buried well nigh to the eaves. The herald of change was a wild rush of wind sweeping down the valley from the broken hills which formed its northern limits. And, within half an hour, the silence was torn, and ripped, and tattered, and the world transformed, and given up to complete and utter chaos. A hurricane descended on the post, and its timbers groaned under the added burden. The forest giants laboured and protested at the merciless onslaught, while the crashing of trees boomed out its deep note amidst the shriek of the storm. As the fury of it all rose, so rose up the snowfall of weeks into a blinding fog which shut out every sight of the desolate plateau as though it had never been.

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Five weeks saw the extent of winter's first onslaught. And after that for awhile, the battle resolved itself into a test of human endurance, with the temperature hovering somewhere below 60° below zero. For a few short hours the sun would deign to appear above the horizon, prosecute its weary journey across the skyline, and ultimately die its daily death with almost pitiful indifference. Then some twenty hours, when the world was abandoned

to the starry magnificence of the Arctic night, supported by the brilliant light of a splendid aurora.

It was during this time that Steve pursued his researches into the lives of these people. He was sitting now in the laboratory, which was a building apart from all the rest. It was the home of the chemist's research. It was equipped with wonderful completeness. Besides the shelves containing all the paraphernalia of a chemist's profession, and the counter which supported a distilling apparatus, and which was clearly intended for other experiment as well, there was a desk, and a small wood stove, which was alight, and radiating a pleasant heat.

It was the desk which held most interest for Steve. It was here he looked to find, in the dead man's papers, in his letters, in his records and books, the answer to every question in his mind.

For some hours he had been reading from one of the volumes of the man's exhaustive diary. It was a living document containing a fascinating story of the chemist's hopes and fears for the great objects which had led to his abandonment of the civilized world for the bitter heights of Unaga. And in every line of it Steve realized it could only have been written by a man of strong, deep conviction and enthusiasm, a man whose purpose soared far above the mere desire for gain. He felt, in the reading, he was listening to the words of a man who was all and more, far more, than his wife had claimed for him.

At last the fire in the stove shook down and he became aware of the work of busy shovels going on just outside. He pulled out his watch, and the yellow light of the oil lamp told him that he had been reading for nearly three hours. Setting a marker in the book he closed it reluctantly, and prepared to return the litter of documents to the drawers which stood open beside him.

At that moment the door opened, and the tall figure of the squaw An-ina stood in the framing.

"Him supper all fixed," she announced, in her quietly assured fashion.

Steve looked up, and his eyes gazed squarely into the woman's handsome face. He was thinking rapidly.

"Say An-ina," he began at last. "I've been reading a whole heap. It's what the man, Brand, wrote. He seems to have been a pretty great feller."

The woman nodded as he paused.

"Heap good man," she commented.

Her eyes lit with an emotion there could be no misunderstanding. For all the savage stock from which she sprang the dead white man had claimed a great loyalty and devotion.

"You see, An-ina," Steve went on, "I came along up here to chase up the murder of two men. My work's to locate all the facts, arrest the murderers, take them back to where I come from, and make my report."

"Sure. That how An-ina mak it so."

The woman's eyes were questioning. She was wondering at the meaning of all this preliminary. And she was not without disquiet. She had come to realize that, with the death of her mistress, only this man and his scouts stood between her and disaster. She could not rid herself of the dread which pursued her now. Little Marcel was a white child. This man was white. She—she was just a squaw. She was of the colour of these "Sleeper" Indians. Would they take the child of her mother heart from her, and leave her to her fate amongst these folk who slept the whole winter through?

"Yes," Steve was gazing thoughtfully at the light which came from under the rough cardboard shade of the lamp. "Well, the whole look of things has kind of

changed since I've—" he indicated the papers on the desk—"taken a look into all these."

"Him read—much. Him look—always look. So."

Steve nodded.

"That's so. Well, I've got to get busy now, and do the things I was sent up to do. But it seems likely there's going to be no murderer to take back with me. It looks like a report of two men dead, by each other's hand, a woman dead through accident, and you, and little Marcel left alive. That being so I guess I can't leave you two up here. Do you get that?" He set his elbows on the desk and rested his chin on his hands. "There's the boy, he's white," he said, watching the squaw's troubled face. "He's got to go right back with me, when my work's done. And you—why, you'd best come, too. I'd hate to rob you of the boy. You'll both need to come right along. And the big folk will say what's to be done with you when we get back. How do you say?"

The trouble had completely vanished from the woman's eyes. It was like the passing of a great shadow. Their velvet softness radiated her thankfulness, her gratitude.

"It good. Much good," she cried, with a sudden abandonment of that stoic unemotional manner which was native to her. "An-ina love white boy. She love him much. Boy go? Then An-ina all go dead. An-ina wait. So storm devil him come. Then An-ina go out, and sleep, sleep, and not wake never no more. An-ina keep boy? Then An-ina much happy. An-ina help white man officer. An-ina strong. Mak long trail. An-ina no sick. No mak tire. Work all time. An' help—much help white man officer. So."

Steve's smiling eyes indicated his acceptance of the woman's protestations.

"That's all right," he said. Then he went on after a

moment's thought: "Now, you know these folk. These 'Sleepers.' Do you know their lingo—their language? I've got to make a big pow-wow with their head man. I guess that can't be done till they wake. You figger they wake at intervals, and they dope themselves again. If that's so, I've got to get their big chief right at that time. D' you guess you could take me right along to get a look at these folk, and, after that, fix things so I can grab their big man first time he wakes?"

The woman nodded at once, and her eyes wore a contented smile.

"Sure. An-ina know. Show him white man officer. Oh, yes. Show him all this folk. Oh, yes. When? Now? Oh, yes. Him not snow. It good. Then sometime An-ina watch. She watch, watch, all time, and when him wake, an' eat, then him white man come an' mak pow-wow. Good?"

"Fine." Steve returned all the papers to the drawers in the desk and stood up. "Guess I'll eat right away, and after that we'll get along an' take a peek at these folks. The boys got the snow clear outside?"

"Him dig much. Snow plenty gone."

"Good. And little Marcel?" Steve enquired, with a tender smile. "Has he been digging?"

The squaw's eyes lit.

"Oh, yes, him boy dig. An' Julyman, an' him Oolak all laff. Boy dig all time, everywhere." An-ina laughed in her silent way. Then she sobered, and a great warmth shone in her eyes. "Boss white man officer love him boy? Yes?"

Steve nodded in his friendly way.

"Oh, I guess so," he admitted. "You see, I've got a little girl baby of my own way back—where I come from."

"So."

There was no mistaking the understanding in the woman's significant ejaculation.

. . . . . .

Steve and An-ina passed out into the wonderful glowing twilight. There was no need for the sun in the steely glittering heavens. The full moonlight of the lower latitudes was incomparable with the Arctic night. From end to end in a great arc the aurora lit the world, and left the stars blazing impotently. The cold was at its lowest depths, and not a breath of wind stirred the air. Up to the eyes in furs the two figures moved out beyond the stockade into the shadowed world.

The squaw led the way, floundering over the frozen snow-drifts with the gentle padding sound of her moccasined feet. Steve kept hard behind her yielding himself entirely to her guidance.

Out in the open no sign remained of the dome-roofed settlement of the Sleepers. The huts had served to buttress the snow for the blizzard. They were buried deep under the great white ridges which the storm had left.

It was something upon which Steve had not calculated. And he swiftly drew the squaw's attention.

"Say," he cried, pointing at the place where the huts had been visible, "I kind of forgot the snow."

The squaw's eyes were just visible under her fur hood. Their brightness suggested a smile.

"No 'Sleeper' man by this hut. Oh, no," she exclaimed decidedly. "No winter, then him 'Sleeper' man live by this hut. Winter come, then him sleep by woods. Much hut. Plenty. All cover, hid-up. Come, I show."

Steve was more than relieved. The snow had looked like upsetting all his calculation.

Once clear of the banked snow-drifts, which rose to the height of the stockade, they moved rapidly over the

crusted surface towards the dark wall of woods which frowned down upon them in the twilight, and, in a few moments, the light of the splendid aurora was shut out, and the myriad of night lights were suddenly extinguished.

"Keep him much close," An-ina cried, her mitted hand grasping Steve by the arm. "Bimeby him bush go all thick. An-ina know."

They trudged on, and as they proceeded deeper and deeper into the darkness of the forest, Steve's eyes became accustomed. The snow broke into patches, and soon they found themselves more often walking over the underlay of rotting pine cones than the winter carpet of the Northern world. The temperature, too, rose, and Steve, at least, was glad to loosen the furs from about his cheeks and nose.

Half an hour of rapid walking proved the squaw's words. The lank tree-trunks, down aisles of which they had been passing, became lost in a wealth of dense undergrowth. It was here that the woman paused for her bearings. But her fault was brief, and in a few moments she picked up the opening of a distinct but winding pathway. The windings, the entanglement of the growth which lined it, made the path seem interminable. But the confidence and decision of his guide left Steve without the slightest doubt. Presently his confidence was justified.

The path led directly to the entrance of a stoutly constructed habitation. Even in the darkness Steve saw that the hut exactly occupied a cleared space. The surrounding bush, in its wild entanglement, completely overgrew it. The result was an extraordinarily effective hiding. Only precise knowledge could ever have hoped to discover it.

An-ina paused at the low door and pointed beyond.

"Track him go long way. More hut. Much, plenty. Oh, yes. Much hut. This, big man chief. All him fam'ly. Come."

She bent low, and passed into the tunnel-like entrance, built of closely interlaced Arctic willow. A dozen paces or more brought them to a hanging curtain of skins. The woman raised this, and held it while Steve passed beyond. A few paces farther on was a second curtain, and An-ina paused before she raised it.

"So," she said, pointing at it. "All him Sleepers."

Steve understood. And with a queer feeling, almost of excitement, he waited while the woman cautiously raised the last barrier. He scarcely knew what to expect. Perhaps complete darkness, and the sound of stertorous, drugged slumber. That which was revealed, however, came as a complete surprise.

The first thing he became aware of was light, and a reeking atmosphere of burning oil. The next was the warmth and flicker of two wood fires. And after that a general odour which he recognized at once. It was the same heavy, pungent aroma that pervaded the fort where the dead chemist stored the small but precious quantities of the strange weed he traded.

They stepped cautiously within, and stood in silent contemplation of the fantastic picture revealed by the three primitive lights. They emanated from what looked like earthenware bowls of oil, upon which some sort of worsted wicks were floating. These were augmented by the ruddy flicker of two considerable wood fires, which burned within circular embankments constructed on the hard earthen floor.

The lights and fires were a revelation to the man, and he wondered at them, and the means by which they were tended. But his speculations were quickly swallowed up by the greater interest of the rest of the scene.

The hut was large. Far larger than might have been supposed; and Steve estimated it at something like thirty feet long by twenty wide. The roof was thatched with reedy grass, bound down with thongs of rawhide to the sapling rafters. The ridge of the pitched roof was supported by two tree-trunks, which had been cut to the desired height, and left rooted in the ground, while the two ends of it rested upon the end walls. The walls themselves were constructed of thick mud plaster, overlaying a foundation of laced willow branches. The whole construction was of unusual solidity, and the smoke-blackened thatch yielded two holes, Indian fashion, through which the fire smoke was permitted exit.

But Steve's main interest lay in the drug-suspended life which the place contained. It was there, still, silent. It lay in two rows down the length of either side of the great interior. In the dim light he counted it. There were forty-two distinct piles of furs, each yielding the rough outline of a prone human figure beneath it. Each figure was deathly still. And the whole suggested some primitive mortuary, with its freight, awaiting identification.

For many moments Steve remained powerless to withdraw his fascinated gaze. And all the while he was thinking of Julyman, and the story he had been told so long ago. He remembered how he had derided it as beyond belief.

At last the fascination passed, and he turned his gaze in search of those things which made this extraordinary scene possible. They were there. Oh, yes. Julyman had not lied. No one had lied about these creatures of hibernation. Piles of food were set out in earthenware bowls, similar to the bowls which contained the floating lights. Then there were other vessels, set ready to hand beside the food, and he conjectured their contents to be the necessary brew of the famous drug.

An-ina's voice broke in upon his reflections.

"Him all much sleep," she said. "No wake now. Bimeby. Oh, yes."

She spoke in her ordinary tone. She had no fear of waking these "dead" creatures.

"Tell me," Steve said after a pause, "who keeps these fires going? Who watches them? And those oil lights. Do they burn by themselves?"

An-ina made a little sound. It was almost a laugh.

"Him light burn all time. Him seal oil," she explained. "Indian man much 'fraid for devil-man come. Him light keep him devil-man 'way all time. Winter, yes. Summer, yes. Plenty oil. Only wind mak him blow out. Fire, oh yes. When him wakes bimeby him mak plenty fire. Each man. Him sit by fire all time eat. Then him sleep once more plenty. Each man wake, each man mak fire. So fire all time. No freeze dead."

"None awake now," demurred Steve lowering his voice unconsciously.

"Oh, no," returned the squaw. "No man wake now. Bimeby yes. H'st!"

The woman's sudden, low-voiced warning startled Steve. Her Indian eyes had been quicker than his. There was a movement under the fur robes of one of the curious heaps in the distance, to the left, and she pointed at it.

Steve followed the direction indicated. Sure enough there was movement. One of the men had turned over on his back.

"Him wake—bimeby," whispered the squaw. "Come!"

She moved towards the doorway, and Steve followed closely. In a moment they had passed the curtained barriers out into the fresh night air.

Steve paused.

"Would that be the headman?" he demanded.

An-ina shook her head.

"Him headman by door. Him sleep where we stand. Him sleep by door. Him brave. Keep devil-man away. So."

"I see," Steve moved on down the path. "Well, we'll get right back. I'm going to reckon on you, An-ina. Each day you go. When the headman wakes you speak with him. You tell him white man officer of the Great White Chief come. He looks for dead white men. You must tell him to keep awake while you bring white man officer. See?"

"Sure. An-ina know. An-ina mak him fix all so."

CHAPTER VIII

BIG CHIEF WANAK-AHA

THE enclosure of the fort was at last cleared of snow. It was now ready, waiting for the elements to render abortive in a few short hours the labour of many days. Julyman and Steve had spent the brief daylight in setting up a snow-break before the open sheds which housed the sleds and canoes. Oolak was at the quarters of the train dogs at the back of the store. These were his charge. He drove them, he fed them, and cared for them. And his art lay in his nimble manipulation of the club, at once the key to discipline, and his only means of opening up a way to their savage intelligence. Steve shared in every labour and none knew better than he the value of work and discipline under the conditions of their long imprisonment upon the bitter plateau.

Daylight had merged into twilight, and the cold blaze of the Northern night had again enthroned itself. It was on the abandonment of his own labours that Steve's attention was at once drawn to others going on beyond the wall of the stockade. And forthwith he passed out of the gates to investigate.

That which he discovered brought a smile to his eyes. From the summit of a drift, which stood the height of the timbered walls, he found himself gazing down upon the quaintly associated figures of little Marcel and his nurse. They were busy, particularly the boy. Amidst a confusion of coiled, rawhide ropes An-ina, hammer in

hand, was securing a rope end to the angle of the wall, while Marcel, with tireless vocal energy, was encouraging and instructing her to his own complete satisfaction.

The sturdy, busy little figure, so overburdened with its bulk of furs, was always a sight that delighted Steve. The childish enthusiasm was so inspiriting, so heedless, so lost to everything but the sheer delight of existence.

While he stood there the rope was made secure and the squaw's efforts ceased. Instantly the scene changed. The high spirits of the boy sought to forestall the next move. With unthinking abandon he flung himself upon the pile of ropes, and manfully struggled to gather them into his baby arms. The result was inevitable. In a moment hopeless confusion reigned and An-ina was to the rescue disentangling him. It was in the midst of this that Marcel became aware of Steve's presence. The moment he was successfully freed he abandoned his nurse for the object of his new worship.

"Us makes life-line," he panted, scrambling up the snow-drift. "Boy fix it all a way through the forest to 'Sleeper' men."

Steve reached out a helping hand, and hauled the little fellow up to his side.

"Ah. I was guessing that way," he said. "And An-ina was helping boy, eh?"

"Oh, 'ess. An-ina help. An-ina always help boy. And boy help Uncle Steve."

Steve led the way down. An-ina was waiting with smiling patience.

"Setting out a line to the Sleepers' camp?" he said, as they reached the woman's side.

An-ina nodded and began to coil the ropes afresh.

"It much good," she said. "Bimeby it storm plenty. So. Each day An-ina mak headman hut. When him

wake then white man officer go mak big talk. Storm, it not matter nothin'. No."

"Fine," Steve agreed warmly. "You're a good squaw, An-ina."

His approval had instant effect.

"Him good? An-ina glad," she observed contentedly.

An-ina moved off towards the forest bearing her burden of ropes, paying out the line as she went.

Steve watched her, his steady eyes full of profound thought.

"Us helps An-ina, Uncle Steve?" enquired the boy doubtfully.

The man had almost forgotten the mitted hand he was still clasping. Now he looked down into the up-turned, enquiring eyes.

"I don't guess An-ina needs us for awhile," he said. Then, after a pause: "No," he added. "Boy's worked hard—very hard. Maybe we'll go back to the fort. And—Uncle tell boy a story? Eh?"

Steve had no need to wait for the torrent of verbal appreciation that came. The boy's delight at the prospect was instant. So they forthwith abandoned the snow-drifts for the warm interior of the store.

Their furs removed, Steve settled himself on the bench which stood before the stove. The room was shadowed by the twilight outside, but he did not light a lamp. There was oil enough for their needs in the stores, but eventualities had to be considered, and rigid economy in all things was necessary.

The picture was complete. The dimly lit store, with its traffic counter deserted, and its shelves sadly depleted of trade. The staunch, plastered and lime-washed walls, which revealed the stress of climate in the gaping cracks that were by no means infrequent. The hard-beaten earth floor swept clean. The glowing stove that knew no

attention from the cleaner's brush. Then the two figures on the rough bench, which was worn and polished by long years of use.

The completion of the picture, however, lay in the personalities for which the rest was only a setting. Steve, in his buckskin shirt and moleskin trousers, which divested him of the last sign of his relationship to the force which administered the white man's law. His young face so set and weather-tanned, so full of decision and strength, and his eyes, far gazing, like those of the men of the deep seas. And the boy upon his knee, his little hands clasping each other in his lap. With his curling, fair hair, and his wide, questioning eyes gazing up into the man's face. With his small body clad from head to foot in the beaded buckskin, which it was his nurse's joy to fashion for him. There was a wonderfully intimate touch in it all. It was a touch that powerfully illustrated the lives of those who are far removed from the luxury of civilization, and who depend for every comfort, even for their very existence, upon those personal physical efforts, the failure of which, at any moment, must mean final and complete disaster.

"Tell boy of bears, an' wolves, an' Injuns, an' debble-men, wot An-ina hers scairt of."

The demand was prompt and decided.

"An-ina scared of devil-men?" Steve smilingly shook his head. "It's only stupid 'Sleeper' men scared of devil-men. Anyway there's no devil-men. Just wolves, and bears, that boy'll hunt and kill when he grows up."

"But hers says ther's debble-men," the boy protested, his eyes wide with awe.

Steve shook his head.

"No," he said firmly. "Uncle Steve knows. He knows better than Indians. Better than An-ina. Boy always remember that."

"Oh, 'ess, boy 'members."

The child impulsively thrust an arm about the man's neck and Steve's arm tightened unconsciously about the little body.

"Tell us 'tory," the child urged.

Steve's contemplative eyes were upon the glowing stove.

"What'll it be about?" he said at last. Then, as though suddenly inspired, "Why, I know, sure. It's about a little boy. A real bright little boy. Oh, I guess he was all sorts of a boy—like—like Marcel."

"Wot's 'all sorts'?" the child demanded.

"Why, just a sample of all the good things a boy can be. Same as you."

The explanation seemed sufficient, and Marcel's eyes were turned dreamily upon the red patch on the side of the stove.

"'Ess," he agreed.

"Well, Uncle Steve travelled a great, long way. It was dreadful hard. There were bears, and wolves, I guess, and queer Indian folk, and rivers, and lakes, and forests; forests much bigger and darker than boy's ever seen."

"Wos thems bigger than the Sleepers' forest?" The challenge was instantly taken up.

"Oh, yes."

"An' darker, an' fuller of debble-men?"

"Much darker, and there were no devil-men, because there just aren't any."

"No. Course not," the boy agreed readily.

"That's so. Well, Uncle Steve came a long, long way, and his dogs were tired, and his Indians were tired——"

"Wos thems like Julyman an' Oolak?"

"Yes. That's who the Indians were. Uncle always has Julyman and Oolak. Well, he came to a valley

where he found a little boy. All sorts of a boy. And he liked the little boy, and the little boy liked him. Didn't he?"

"'Ess."

"Well, the little chap was alone."

"Didn't hims have no An-ina?"

"Oh, yes. He had his nurse. But his Pop had gone away, and so had his Mummy. So he was kind of alone. Well, the little boy and Uncle Steve became great friends. Oh, big friends. Ever so big. And Uncle Steve didn't want ever to leave the little boy. And I don't guess the little boy ever wanted to leave Uncle Steve. But then you see there was the Pop and Mummy, who'd gone away, and of course the boy liked them ever so much. So Uncle Steve was in a dilemma."

"Wot's 'd'lemma'?"

"Why just a 'fix.' Like boy was in when he got all mussed up with the ropes just now."

"Wos you mussed up with ropes?"

"Oh, no. Only in a 'fix.'"

"'Ess." The briefest explanations seemed to satisfy.

"Well, Uncle Steve guessed the Pop an' Mummy wouldn't come back for ever so long, maybe not till the boy was grown up. So he guessed he'd take the little boy—such a jolly little chap—with him, back to his home, where there was a nice Auntie, and a little baby cousin. A little girl, such a pretty little dear, all eyes, and fat cheeks, that sort of tell you life's the bulliest thing ever. Well, he took him to his home, such a long, long way, over snow, and over rivers and lakes, where there's fishes, and through forests where there's wolves, an' bears——"

"Does hims see any debble-mens?"

"No. Because Uncle Steve says there just aren't any."

"But An-ina sezes ther' is."

"An-ina's a squaw."

"'Ess."

"Well, after long time this funny little fellow finds his new Auntie, and he loves his little cousin right away, and he has such a bully time with her. They play together. Such games. She pulls his hair and laughs, and the boy, who's such a bright little kid, likes it because she's a little girl, and they grow, and grow up together, and then—and then——"

"Does hims marry her, an' live happy ever after?"

The question was disconcerting. But Steve did his best.

"Well, I can't just say, old fellow," he demurred. "You see, I hadn't fixed that."

"But they allus does in my Mummy's 'tories," came the instant protest.

"Do they? Well, then I guess these'll have to," the man agreed. "We'll fix it that way."

"'Ess. An' then——"

But the prompting failed in its purpose.

"An' then? Why—I guess that's just all. You see, when folks get married, and live happy ever after, there's most generally no more story to tell. Is there?"

"No." Then the child sat up. His appetite had been whetted. "Tell boy 'nother 'tory. Great big, long one. Ever so long."

Steve shook his head.

"Guess Uncle Steve's not great on yarns," he admitted. "You see, I was kind of thinking. Say, how'd boy like to go with Uncle Steve, and see the nice Auntie, and the little dear, with lovely, lovely curly hair and blue eyes, and cheeks like—like——"

"'Ess. Us goes," the child cried, with a sudden enthusiasm. "Us finds all the lakes, an' rivers, an' forests,

an' wolves, an' bears, an' the little dear. Boy likes 'em. Us goes now?"

The headlong nature of the demand set Steve smiling.

"Well, I guess we can't go till winter quits," he said. "We'll need to wait awhile till it's not dark any more. Then we'll take An-ina. And Julyman. And Oolak. And the dogs. How's that? Then, after awhile, when boy's Pop and his Mummy come back, then maybe we'll come right back, too. Eh?"

The anticipation of it all was ravishing to the child mind, and the boy re-settled himself.

"'Ess," he agreed, with a great sigh. "An' the little dear, an' the nice Auntie. Us all come back." Then with infantile persistence he returned to his old love. "More 'tory," he demanded. "'Bout debble-mens." Then, as an after-thought: "Wot isn't, cos Uncle says they doesn't, an' An-ina says him is when he wasn't, cos he can't be."

Steve sprang to his feet with a great laugh, bearing the little fellow in his strong arms. He had accomplished his task and all was well.

"No more 'tory," he cried setting him on the ground. "All us men have work to do. We need to help An-ina. Come on, old fellow."

And with a great feeling of relief and contentment he began the re-adjustment of the furs which protected the little life which had become so precious to him.

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For all the nights were almost interminable, and the days so desperately short time passed rapidly. It was nearly three weeks later that the patient, indefatigable An-ina brought the word Steve awaited.

The daylight had passed, engulfed by the Arctic night which had added a dull, misty moon to its splendid

illumination. The temperature had risen. Steve knew a change was coming. The signs were all too plain. He knew that the period of peace had nearly run its course, and the elements were swiftly mobilizing for a fresh attack.

He was standing in the great gateway considering these things when An-ina came to him. She appeared abruptly over the top of the great snow-drift, which had been driven against the angle of the stockade. The soft "pad" of her moccasined feet first drew his attention, and immediately all thought of the coming storm passed from his mind.

"Him big chief wake all up," she announced urgently, as she reached his side.

"Did you speak to him?"

The man's enquiry was sharpened by responsive eagerness. The squaw nodded.

"An-ina say, 'Boss white man officer come mak big talk with big chief, Wanak-aha. Him look for dead white man by the big water. Yes.' Him big chief say, 'White man officer? Him not know this man. Who?' An-ina say much—plenty. Big chief all go mad. Oh, much angry. Then An-ina mak big talk plenty. She say, 'Big Chief not mak big talk, then boss white man officer of Great White Chief come kill up all Indian man.' Big chief very old. Him all 'fraid. Him shake all over like so as seal fat. Much scare. Oh, yes." She laughed in her silent fashion. "So him say, 'Boss white man officer come, then Big Chief Wanak-aha mak plenty big talk.' Then him sleep. Oh, yes."

The woman's amusement at the chief's panic was infectious. Steve smiled.

"I guess we'll go right along," he said. Then he indicated the moon with its misty halo. "Storm."

Again An-ina nodded.

"Him storm plenty—sure," she agreed. "Boss come quick?"

"Right away."

A moment later An-ina was leading the way up the long slope of the snow-drift, returning over the tracks which her own moccasins had left.

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The atmosphere of the hut was oppressive. It reeked with the smoke of wood fire. It was nauseating with a dreadful human foulness. But over all hung the sickly sweet odour of the Adrisol drug, which oppressed the brain and weighted down the eyelids of those who had just left the pure cold air beyond the curtained doorway.

Steve was not without a feeling of apprehension. He was in the presence of the active operation of the subtle drug. He had read the dead chemist's papers. He knew the deadly exhalations of the weed when growing, or when in an undried state. He also knew that distillation robbed it of its poisonous effect, but for all that, the sickly atmosphere left him with a feeling of nausea.

He and An-ina were sitting beyond one of the two wood fires that had been replenished. The old chief, Wanak-aha, was squatting on his haunches amongst his frowsy fur robes at the opposite side. He was a shrivelled, age-weazened creature whose buckskin garments looked never to have been removed from his aged body. His years would have been impossible to guess at. All that was certain about him was that his mahogany face was like creased parchment, that his eyes peered out in the dim light of the hut through the narrowest of slits, that he was alert, vital to an astounding degree, and that he suggested a foulness such as humanity rarely sinks to.

An-ina was speaking in the tongue native to the old

man, who was replying in his monosyllabic fashion while he kept all his regard for the stern-eyed white man, who, the squaw was explaining, represented all the unlimited power of the white peoples.

Steve waited in patience for the completion of these necessary preliminaries, and acted his part with the confidence of wide experience. And presently An-ina turned to him. Her eyes were serious, but there was a smile behind her words.

"Him say him much big friend for white man," she said, in her broken way. "Him love all white man so as a brother. White man mak plenty good trade with Indian man. It much good. So him big chief plenty friend. Oh, yes."

Steve inclined his head seriously.

"Tell him that's all right," he said. "Tell him white man good friend, too. White man love all Indian man. Tell him all white man children of Great White Chief. When they die Great White Chief know. If Indian man kill white man then Great White Chief send all thunder and lightning and kill up all Indian man. Tell him Great White Chief know that two white men all killed dead by great waters. He know Chief Wanak-aha's young men find them. Great White Chief knows Indian man didn't kill them, but, as he knows where they are, he must show the Great White Chief's Officer where they are, so he can take their bones back to their own country, or bury them as he sees fit. If Chief Wanak-aha does not tell White Officer, and his young men don't show him this place, then the thunders and lightning will come and kill up all Indian 'Sleeper' men."

An-ina interpreted rapidly. And by the length of her harangue, and by the attitude of the old man, Steve shrewdly suspected she was adding liberal embellishments such as her own savage mind suggested as being

salutory. It was always so. An Indian on the side of the police was merciless to his own people.

The old man replied with surprising energy, and it was obvious to Steve that panic had achieved all he desired. So he was content to watch silently while the soft-voiced woman, with unsmiling eyes, spurred the little, old, great man to decisions which it is more than probable only real fear could have hastened.

At last An-ina ceased speaking. She turned to Steve who received the net results she had achieved in concrete form.

"It much good," she said, without permitting the smallest display of feeling before the watchful eyes of the old chief. "Him say all as An-ina tell boss white man officer. Young men find dead white men all kill up. In great, deep place by big waters. So. Him say when winter him all go then young men take boss white man officer, show him all. Help him much plenty. All him dog-train, all him young man for boss white man officer. Yes. Not so as snow him not go. Not find. All kill dead, sure. 'Sleeper' man sleep plenty. Then him all wake. Boss white man say 'go.' Yes."

The purpose of the visit was achieved. Steve desired nothing more. These Indians would take him to the place where the two white men had fought out the old, old battle for a woman. Yes, he was convinced now that An-ina's original story was the true one. His visit to these squalid creatures had served a double purpose. The old man's willingness to comply with his demands amply convinced him that the wife's belief had no foundation in the facts. Had the Indians murdered Marcel Brand and his partner, the whole attitude of the chief must have been very different.

It was some moments before he replied. It was necessary that he should play his part to the end. So

he appeared to consider deeply before he accepted the chief's offer.

At length he raised his eyes from the flickering blaze of the fire. He gazed round the dimly lit room where the Indians lay about in their deathlike slumber. There was a stirring as of waking in a far corner, and for awhile he contemplated the direction. Then, at last, his eyes came back to the crumpled face of the old man awaiting anxiously his reply.

"Tell him," he said, addressing the squaw without withdrawing his gaze from the face of the old man, "that the officer of the Great White Chief will wait till the snow goes. Tell him he'll need to have his young men ready then to make the trail. And when they've shown the officer all they've found, and told him all they know, then the officer will tell the Great White Chief that the 'Sleeper' men are good men, who deserve all that is good. Tell him, there will be no thunder or lightning. And if white men come again to the fort and find it as it has been left, nothing taken, nothing destroyed, then maybe they'll bring good trade for the Indian men, and presents for the big chief. But if they come and find that one little thing has been destroyed or stolen, then the thunder and lightning will speak, and there'll be no more Indians."

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When Steve and An-ina emerged from the woods utter and complete darkness reigned. The world had been swallowed up under an inky pall. The moon, the brilliant stars, the blazing northern lights—all were extinguished, and not a ray of light was left to guide them the last few hundred yards to safety. Furthermore snow was falling. It was falling in great flakes half as big as a man's hand.

The life-line which the woman had set up was all that stood between them and complete disaster.

CHAPTER IX

THE VISION OF THE SPIRE

WINTER with all its deadly perils had become a memory. Life was supreme again on the plateau of Unaga. It was in the air, in the breezes sweeping down from the Northern hills, where the crystal snow caps no longer had power to inspire distrust. It was in the flowing waters of the river. It was in the flights of swarming wildfowl, winging to fresh pastures of melting snows. It was in the new-born grass blades, thrusting up their delicate heads to rid the world of winter's unsightliness. The animal world, too, was seeking to alleviate the pangs of semi-starvation to which it had so long been condemned. The sense of gladness was stirring, lifting the world upon a glorious pinacle of youthful hope.

Gladness was in An-ina's heart as she moved over the dripping grass, bearing the water fresh dipped from the river whose banks were a-flood in every direction. Was not the darkness of winter swallowed up by the brilliant sunlight? Was not the child of her heart trudging manfully at her side, firmly grasping the bucket handle in a vain belief in the measure of his help? Was not the moment rapidly approaching, when the white man officer would return with the young men of the Sleepers from the "deep place" by the "big waters?" Would not the day soon come when the trail to the south-

lands would again be broken? And would she not gaze once more upon the pleasant lands that gave her birth? Oh, yes. She knew. It was a great rush to the promised home, far from the desperate life on the plateau of Unaga, with the child, whose dancing eyes and happy smile were like a ray of sunshine amidst the shadows of her life.

Morning and night, now, An-ina looked for the return of those who had set out before the break of the winter. A month had passed since Steve's going. She was quite alone with her boy, with the wakened Indians preparing for their labours of the open season. The "white man officer" would return. An-ina had no fear for him even on the winter trail of Unaga. He would return, and then—and then— And so she watched and waited, and worked with all the will of her simple, savage heart.

It was no easy task that lay ahead. An-ina knew that. Steve had told her much during those dark days of winter. He had spoken of a thousand miles. What was a mile? She did not know. A sun. A moon. These things she knew. But his tone she understood. And she knew what he meant when he declared his intention of beating schedule, and his determination not to spend another winter on Unaga if it were the last trail he ever made. She was ready. And, in her simple woman's way she beguiled the days of waiting with speculation as to the white woman who had inspired in this white man's heart so great a desire.

Life was more than good to An-ina just now. She was young. She was thrilling with the wild emotions of her untamed blood. She was an Indian of the finest ancestry, but more than all she was a devoted woman. She had lost a mistress whom she had loved, and a master whom she had been glad to serve. She had found one to take their places, one whose first act had been his

re-assurance that she should not be robbed of the child who was her all. There was no one greater in all the world to her than the "white man officer" whose courage and will she counted as powers greater than the storms of Unaga.

All day she laboured at her many tasks. And the boy, faithful to his doctrine of helpfulness, found a world of recreation in his idea. Thus, with the passing of the sun, they stood together at the gateway of the fort with eyes searching, as many times they had searched before, for a sign of the return of the trail men.

"Us wants Uncle Steve."

There was a plaintive appeal in the boy's tone which found an echo in the woman's heart. She sighed, but her voice was steady as she replied:

"Bimeby him come," she said.

"'Ess. Bimeby him come."

But the boy's agreement lacked conviction. A moment later, with his big eyes turned to the south-east, the way he had seen the expedition set out, he went on:

"Boy's Pop didn't come. An-ina said him's do. Boy's Mummy go 'way 'cos Uncle Steve said her does. Uncle Steve hims all goes, too. Boy want Uncle Steve."

"Him come bimeby."

The woman had no words with which to comfort. It was not lack of desire. Though her conviction was unwavering, she, too, in her heart, echoed the plaint.

For some moments they continued their evening vigil. The eyes of both searched the growing shadows. And, as was always the case, it was the child who finally broke the silence.

"Us cries," he said half tearfully.

It was then the Indian in the woman asserted itself.

"Squaw-men him weeps. 'Brave' him fight. No cry. Oh, no. Only fight. Boy great white 'brave.' Him not cry. No."

Marcel nodded, but his eyes were turned to the hills.

"'Ess. Boy great white 'brave,'" he agreed, in a choking voice. "Boy not cry—never. What's hims little things all dancing in the fog, An-ina?" he enquired, his mind suddenly distracted, pointing at a gap between two low hills, where a thin vapour of fog was slowly rising. "Is them's debble-mens?"

The keen eyes of the squaw followed the pointing finger. In a moment there leapt into them a light which required no words to interpret. But even in her excited joy the Indian calm remained uppermost. She drew nearer the child, and one of her soft brown hands rested caressingly on his shoulder.

"Him not devil-men," she said, in a deep tone of exaltation. "Him Uncle Steve an' all fool 'Sleeper' men. They all come so as An-ina say."

Then the smile in her eyes suddenly transformed her, and her joy could no longer be denied. She stooped over the small figure and pressed her lips upon the soft white forehead.

"Us go by river. An-ina hide. Boy hide. Then Uncle Steve come. Boy jump out. Him say 'Boo!' Uncle Steve all scairt. Much frightened all dead. So?"

The appeal was irresistible. The boy's excitement leapt. In a moment he was transformed from a tearful "brave" to a happy, laughing child. He set off at a run for the river, with An-ina close upon his heels, utterly regardless of the fact that they were within full view of the on-coming trail men. This was a detail. The child's enthusiasm permitted no second thought, and his breathless orders to his nurse were flung back as he ran. The cover of the bush-lined river was reached, and the hiding-place was selected just short of the flood water.

The child crouched down trembling with excitement. And the sound of Uncle Steve's voice giving orders as he

came up on the far side of the water made the suspense almost unendurable. He talked to An-ina, who crouched at his side. He chattered incessantly. The splash of a canoe, dropped into the water, was exquisite torture. The dip of paddles set him well-nigh beside himself. Then, a few moments later, when the light craft slithered on the mud of the shallows, just beyond the hiding-place, he felt the psychological moment had come. Out he sprang at his victim, who was still ankle deep in the water.

"Boo-o-o!" he shrieked, with all the power of his little lungs, and, a moment later, he was gathered into the caressing arms of a terrified "uncle."

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The work was accomplished. The police officer had fulfilled his mission, a mission detailed to him coldly, officially, without a shadow of regard for the tremendous trials entailed, and with only an eye for the capacity of the officer selected.

So far he had beaten his own schedule. He had calculated his work would occupy two years from the moment of his going to his return to Deadwater, but he meant to cut this down by something like six months. The resolve to do so had been taken during the drear of winter. He had been haunted by the appealing eyes of the woman he loved, and by the memory of the soft clutch of baby hands. And his desire had become irresistible.

Under his new resolve it had become necessary to speed the waking of the Indians. He had had no scruple. Again he had bearded the chief and forced his will upon him. For all the old man's fears of the white man's threats it had been no easy task. But at last he had convinced him of the hopeless recklessness of denying him.

So twenty of the young men were found who reluctantly enough gave up the last month of their winter's sleep. And now he had returned with his work accomplished.

Steve had no illusions upon the desperate nature of the rush for home. He knew the chances he was taking. A week's preparation. He could spare no more time. A journey on foot of some hundreds of miles. An Indian carry-all hauled by reindeer for the boy and the camp outfit, the dogs to be herded without burden till their usefulness could serve. For each man, and An-ina, the burden of a heavy pack. Such preparations were wholly inadequate. He knew that. He was staking the courage and endurance of those he was responsible for against a ruthless, inhospitable world.

Oh, yes, his eyes were wide to the dangers that lay ahead. He knew them all. He had visions of a dripping, melting land. He knew the spring rains with their awesome powers of washout and flood. The blinding, steaming fogs of the high altitudes. So with the glacial avalanches, and the terror of thawing tundra, shaking, treacherous, bottomless.

The week passed rapidly and the moment for the "pull-out" came. The Indians were awake, and their winter quarters in the woods had been abandoned for the domed igloos of the open season. The fort was alive with their comings and goings. They were alert for the promised spoils.

Peaceable, kindly, the sturdy undersized people of the outlands were driven to a supreme selfishness by reason of the conditions under which they lived. They cared little for anything but that which the white folk could provide. Without interest or ambitions, beyond such comfort as they could snatch from life, they desired only to be left in peace. But with real amiability they wished the stranger well in his going.

The post presented a curious enough scene on the morning of departure. And to Steve, at least, thought of it was to recur many times in the great struggle that lay before him. The poles of the carry-all, their ends trailing upon the ground, loaded with camp outfit and ready for the boy, stood just within the stockade. The dogs were ready and waiting under Oolak's charge. Inside the store, Steve supported by Julyman and An-ina, and the child Marcel, occupied the well-worn bench beside the stove.

He was receiving the farewell words of the old chief, Wanak-aha, who was thankful enough to see the last of the disturber of his winter sleep. The old man was surrounded by his equally aged counsellors, and the whole deputation squatted ceremonially upon their haunches about him. The store had been stripped of all supplies. The shelves were bare and only a litter of packings remained to mark the end of the chemist's great enterprise.

Steve addressed the chief through An-ina without relaxing his authority. He told the old man that everything that was good in the store had been handed over a present to his people for their valuable services to the Great White Chief. The store was now empty of everything that was good. He told him that this was the way the Great White Chief always acted towards those who served him. The things that remained in the store were only evil things that were full of evil magic. The Great White Chief had hidden these things deeply, and he had set a spell upon them. This had been done so that no harm should come to the Indian. In this he was referring to the contents of the dead man's laboratory. He told him that the Great White Chief had ordered him to place the store and fort in the chief's safe keeping. No Indian man was to enter it to destroy it. If he did the evil spirits would break loose, and death and disaster

for the whole tribe would undoubtedly follow. Therefore he had summoned the council that Wanak-aha might give his pledge for the safety of the property of the Great White Chief.

He told them he was going now because he wanted the Indians to live in peace, with their slumbers undisturbed. He might never come again. He could not say. But if the Great White Chief sent anybody, it would only be for the purpose of giving great benefit to the Indians, whom he undoubtedly regarded as a very wise and good people.

It was a masterly exhibition of Steve's understanding of the savage it was his work to deal with, and the happy effect was promptly evidenced. Ten minutes of monosyllabic discussion between the chief and his counsellors produced the pledge Steve desired, and he knew from the manner of it that the pledge would be kept to the letter. But it brought forth something more. An-ina was called upon to interpret an expression of the friendly spirit in which the Indians parted from the disturber of their slumbers.

The old man in a long peroration explained all he and his people felt. They were in no way behind the Great White Chief in their regard, he assured Steve. They loved the white man, whose ways were not always Indian ways. He re-affirmed his solemn promise that the fort should be safe in Indian hands. Furthermore he told him they had no desire to anger the evil spirits it contained. In conclusion he produced a beaded seal-skin bag which he asked the white man to accept. It contained, he explained, the bones of the right hand of one of his ancestors who had been a great hunter and warrior, and withal a lucky and mighty chief who was only murdered by his people after a long and fierce reign. This bag, with its contents, was a sure talisman and guard

against the evil spirits of Unaga, and they were very, very many, and very cruel.

With due solemnity Steve accepted this priceless gift, and, to add to his display of gratification, he drew little Marcel to him and secured it about his neck. Then, turning to the chief, he explained. He pointed at the child, and assured him that the white man regarded his children before all things—even before his own life. Therefore, to display his gratitude to the great chief, he bestowed the gift upon the child whose safety he desired above all things in the world. Approval was unanimous. To every one of these simple creatures the white man's act was one of the greatest self-sacrifice. And even in the more enlightened minds of An-ina and Julyman there was a deep appreciation of the act.

When the council broke up, and the fur-clad Indians moved out, Steve might well have been forgiven had he felt that his work had been well and truly done.

With the going of the last Indian he promptly shouldered his pack, and Julyman and An-ina did the same. A moment later he took the child in his arms.

"Come," he said, and led the way out of the building.

Ten minutes later the outfit was on the move, and the great adventure, with the newborn mosquitoes and flies swarming, began in a blaze of spring sunshine.

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Out on a snow-clad ridge, a saddle between two forest-clad hills, a meagre camp was set. The shelter of woods against the keen north wind made the resting-place possible. Two weeks of struggle, two weeks of tremendous effort left the choice of daylight camping ground a matter of small moment, but just now the bleak ridge had been selected for a definite reason.

Steve and An-ina were standing out in the gap, with

little Marcel between them. Oolak was somewhere within the woods, tending his savage dogs. Julyman was hugging the fire, with complete disregard for all but its precious warmth.

Those in the gap were staring out at the north-east with eyes held fascinated by the wonder of it all. It was the Spire, the amazing Spire of Unaga rearing its mighty crest out of the far-off distance. Even the child was awed to silence by the spell of the inspiring vision.

They were gazing upon a world of fire and smoke. And the fire was belching out of the bowels of the earth and lighting up the whole skyline far and wide. It was a scene no words could adequately describe. It was a scene to awe the stoutest heart. The whole country in the distant north seemed to lie prostrate at the mercy of a world of devouring flame.

CHAPTER X

THE RUSH OUTFIT

"CURSE 'em!"

Ian Ross raised a hand and swept it across the back of his muscular neck. Then he wiped his palm on his cord breeches leaving there the stain of his own blood, and the crushed remains of hundreds of mosquitoes.

"Get a look at that," he cried, in genial disgust.

The man riding at his side turned and laughed without mirth. His eyes remained serious.

"Sure," he said indifferently. "We've got to get 'em, this time of year, Doc. We need a head breeze."

"Got to get? What we're getting is hell—plumb hell," exploded the Scotsman.

The other nodded.

"Sure. But there's worse hell on the trail, and it isn't us who's got it."

The rebuke was without offence. But it was sufficient. In a moment Ross was flung headlong back to the haunting thoughts of the great effort he and his companion were engaged upon.

"Another day—and no sign," he said.

"No."

There was no great display, yet the doctor's words, and the monosyllabic reply, were deeply significant.

Jack Belton—Inspector Jack Belton—and the doctor were on a "rush outfit" of rescue. They were riding

back to camp after a long day of search along the banks of the Theton River. Their search was systematic. Each day they rode out and followed the intricate course of the smiling river with its endless chain of lakes. Each day their camp broke up and followed a similar course, but taking the direct and shortest route down the river. Then, at nightfall, the two men rejoined their outfit, only to follow a similar procedure next day. Thus they had left the headwaters far behind, and were steadily working their way down the river. Somewhere along that river was Steve Allenwood, alive or dead. They could not guess which. They could not estimate where. It was their purpose to leave no creek, or lake, or yard of the great river unexplored, until the secret was yielded up.

"And when we find him, what then?" the doctor exclaimed in a desperate fashion. "Maybe he's sick. Maybe—whatever it is we've got to heal him, and break him at the same time. God!"

"Yes." Jack Belton turned his dark eyes on his companion. They were hot with feeling. "Say, Doc, I'm crazy to find that boy, and find him cursing the skitters with a wholesome vocabulary, same as you and me. But I'd hand over my Commission in the force with pleasure to my biggest enemy rather than pass him the dope you and me need to."

The Scotsman nodded, and the kindly face reflected the bitterness of his feelings.

"And I handed him my promise, and Millie's," he said. "He was crazy about them both—God help him."

"Poor devil!"

The great valley was lit from end to end by the last flaming rays of the setting summer sun. The green carpet was dotted by a thousand wooded bluffs, and a wonderful tracery of watercourses caught and reflected the

dying light. Not a breath of air stirred. And the warm, cloudless evening was alive with the hum of insects, and the incessant chorus of the frogs at the water's edge. Now and again the far-off cry of coyote or wolf came dolefully across the trackless grass. For the rest a wonderful peace reigned—that peace which belongs to the wilderness where human habitation has not yet been set up.

It had been a tremendous time for both these men, and for those under the Inspector's command. The whole thing had been an exhibition of human energy, rarely to be witnessed. It had all been the result of an episodé on a similar, calm summer afternoon, which would remain for all time a landmark in the doctor's life.

He had been reading in his shanty surgery on the Allowa Reserve. The stream of his medicine-loving patients had ceased to flow. The little room was heavy with the reek of his pipe. So he had risen from his chair and passed to the door for a breath of air. It was then that he was confronted by a gaudy coloured apparition. An Indian, whose race was foreign to him, was patiently sitting on the back of a mean-looking skew-ball pony, clad in a parti-coloured blanket of flaming hues. The moment Ross appeared in the doorway the Indian produced a crumpled, folded paper from the folds of his blanket and offered it to him without a word.

He accepted it with a keen curiosity. He unfolded it and glanced at the handwriting. It was unrecognizable. But that which stirred him to the depths of his soul, and flooded his heart with something like panic, was the signature at the bottom of it. It was Steve's—Steve Allenwood.

The perusal of that letter was the work of a few moments. And throughout the reading Ross was aware—painfully aware—of the aggravating calm of the man

who had written it. But under its unemotional words urgency, deep, terrible urgency, was revealed. Accident and sickness had hit the writer hard. His position was desperate. And the final paragraph epitomized his extremity in no uncertain fashion.

> I mean to do all a man can to make the headwaters of the Theton River. Maybe I'll succeed. I can't say. If I don't you'll understand. Maybe you'll break it to Nita as easy as you can. If you can help her, and the kiddie, I'll be mighty thankful. Thank God the little one won't understand. I'm sending this by a Yellow-Knife. He reckons he knows Deadwater, and can get through quick. Please pay him well. I can't get farther than the headwater—if that. After that—well, it depends on the help that can reach us.

Optimism and energy were amongst Ian Ross's strongest characteristics. His decision was taken on the instant. With the aid of an interpreter he questioned the Yellow-Knife, who knew no language but his own and that of the Caribou-Eaters.

The man's story was broken but lurid.

The white man, he said, had arrived at Fort Duggan on foot, pursued by the evil spirits of Unaga. He assured the doctor that these devils had torn the clothes from him, and left him well-nigh naked. So with all the party. There was blood on his feet and hands, where the spirits had sought to devour him. Yes, they had even devoured his shoes. The white man had a small white pappoose tied on to his back. The child was sleeping, or sick, or dead. There was a squaw and an Indian with him, whose bones looked out of their skins, and whose eyes were fierce and wild like those who have looked the evil spirits in the face. These two living-dead were hauling

a sort of sled. And on the sled was another Indian who was broken, and maybe dead. No, there were no dogs, no outfit. It was just as he said. The Shaunekuks were good Indians, and they gave the strangers food, and milk, and clothes to replace those the evil spirits had devoured. They also had the canoes which the white man had left with them a year ago. He, the messenger, was on a visit to the Shaunekuks at the time, for a caribou hunt. But he abandoned the hunt at the white man's request, who said he, the doctor, would pay him well.

The man was paid under promise of guiding an outfit back to the Theton River country, and then began a hustle of a cyclonic nature.

Corporal Munday set out for Reindeer forthwith, and made headquarters in record time. Within half an hour of his arrival Superintendent McDowell had issued his orders for a "rush outfit." And three hours later saw it on the trail. There was no hesitation. There was no question. There was a comrade in peril, and with him others. There was a woman—although only a squaw—and a white child. No greater incentive was needed, and young Jack Belton was selected to lead the "rush" for his known speed and capacity on the trail.

Something of the feelings stirring found expression in McDowell's final instructions to his subordinate at the moment of departure.

"I don't care a curse if you kill every darn horse between here and the Landing," he said. "Commandeer all you need—and plenty. I don't care what you do. You've got to bring Allenwood back alive, or—or break your darn neck."

And Belton had needed no urging. He had cut down the month's journey to the Theton River to something like twenty days. He had foundered six teams of horses,

and worn his two men and his scouts well-nigh threadbare with night and day travel. But the doctor had proved invincible, as had the Yellow-Knife scout on his skewbald pony, which, for all its meanness of shape and size, had stood up to it all.

They had already been pursuing the river course for four days, and, so far, it had withheld its secret. Somewhere out there on those wide shining waters a man was struggling in a great final effort to defeat once more the ruthless forces of Nature against which he had battled so long and so successfully.

And what would victory mean for him? Ross knew. Jack Belton knew. And their knowledge of that which was awaiting him, should a final triumph be his, added a deep depression to the silence which had fallen between them.

The great sun went to its death in a blaze of splendour, and the long Northern twilight softened the scene with misty, velvet shadows which crept down from distant hills to the north and south. The woodland bluffs, too, promptly lost their sharpness of outline, and the green of the trackless grass mellowed to a delicate softness which seemed to round off the peace of the airless evening.

Now they picked up the spiral of smoke from the campfire, and direction was promptly changed towards it.

"I sort of feel he'll make it," the Scotsman said abruptly, as though in simple continuation of his unspoken thought.

"You can't kill—him," replied the other emphatically. "I haven't a doubt. He guessed he could make the headwaters. He'll make them. I'm only scared to miss him in the night."

The doctor shook his head.

"I don't fancy that's going to happen. Our camp's

always on the main water, in the open. There's our watch. No. I'm a deal more scared of him making a day camp, resting. Even then we haven't missed anything large enough to hide up a skitter."

"No."

Now the spot light of the camp-fire shone out of the soft twilight, and the sound of voices came back from the water's edge.

"I'm wondering about what he needs to be told," Ross said presently. "It's for me I guess."

"How's that?"

The younger man turned quickly. The thought of this thing had weighed heavily with him. He was a police officer who was ready to face any hardship, any of the hundred and one risks and dangers his calling demanded. But from the moment he was detailed for his present duty he had been oppressed by the thought of the story which would have to be told Steve, and which duty, as leader of the rescue party, he calculated must certainly fall to his lot. He had known Steve from the moment of his joining the force. He had worked with him on the trail. He had been present at his senior's wedding, and he remembered his comrade's happiness at the consummation of a real love match. And now? The doctor's words had lifted a great load from his mind.

"There's two sides to be told," Ross said, with a sigh. "There's the police side, which deals mostly with the Treaty Money, I guess, and there's that other which should be mine. You see, he left them in my care. And so there's a big account to be squared between him and me. Best let me handle the whole rotten thing." Then with a sound that was a laugh without the least mirth: "It's a doctor's job to hand out unpleasant dope to a patient. It's a policeman's job to act unpleasant.

Guess the act isn't needed, but the dope is. Yes, it's mine, Belton. Will you leave it that?"

"I'll be so glad to," the other replied with a sigh of relief, "I don't know how to tell you about it. It had me scared to death. That's so. Even McDowell shirked it. He told me Steve had to get the whole yarn before he got into Reindeer. That's the sort of folk we are. And it's not a thing to brag about."

The other shook his head.

"It needs good men to hate hurting another," he said. "Guess it's a scare you don't need to be ashamed of. I'll tell him because I've got to. I hate it worse than hell. But I owe the hurt to myself for the way I've—failed his trust."

"I don't see you need to blame yourself, Doc," the youngster returned, becoming judicial under his relief. "Steve won't, if I know him. This sort of thing happens right along under a husband's nose. Just as long as woman's what she is, and there's low down skunks of men around, why— But, say, there's something doing at the camp!"

He lifted his reins and urged his weary horse into a rapid canter, and the doctor's horse clung close to its flank. The eager eyes of both were searching for the meaning of the stir which the youthful Inspector had detected. And instinctively they gazed out down the broad waters of the placid river as far as the rapidly deepening twilight would permit.

Simultaneously their eyes rested on two objects, a little indistinct, floating upon the water. They looked so small in the immensity of the spread of the river. But even so their outline was familiar enough.

"Canoes!" cried Belton.

"It's him!" came in the deep tones of the doctor.

Five minutes later they were out of the saddle and

standing with others on the grassy river bank watching the steady approach of two canoes, paddling their way up against the easy, sluggish stream.

Near by were the two four-horsed wagons, and the camp-fire with the forgotten supper still wafting its pleasant odours upon the breathless air. Flies, too, and mosquitoes were in abundance. But these, like the rest, were forgotten. The men of the police outfit had eyes and thoughts for the canoes only. Each and all were wondering at that which they were to reveal.

Suddenly a shout broke the profound stillness. It came from the young officer who could restrain himself no longer.

"Ho, you, Steve!"

The shout carried away over the water. Those on the bank could almost hear it travel. Then followed what seemed an interminable interval. But it was seconds only before a faint call came back.

"Hoo-y!"

The policeman was given no opportunity for reply. The doctor's great husky voice anticipated him.

"Ho, Steve! It's Doc Ross!"

He had recognized the answering voice and flung his excited greeting in a tumult of feeling.

. . . . . .

The canoes drove head on for the river bank.

As Belton and Ross sought to discover the nature of their freight the coursing blood of excited hope stagnated. There was only the quickening of apprehension.

A grim, strange figure was confronting them. It was kneeling up in the prow of the nearest vessel. A wild, straining, desperate light shone feverishly in eyes looking out of a face lost in a tangle of beard and whisker. The brows were fiercely depressed, suggesting a bitter

defensive spirit. The eyes were lost in cavernous sockets, and the cheeks were sunken and scored with lines of ravening hunger. The whole was clad in the discoloured buckskin of a Northern Indian, with a mat of untended hair reaching to its shoulders.

The waiting men understood. This was their comrade, the man to whose succour they had rushed. A tragic story of suffering was in that single figure, which, paddle in hand, was battling with a burden too great for any one man to bear. Only he, and the squat figures of Shaunekuk paddlers were to be seen. For the rest nothing was visible to the onlookers.

As the canoe grounded on the reed-grown mud the doctor's deep-voiced "Thank God!" met with no response. The wild-looking figure scrambled off the boat, and plunged nearly knee-deep into the mud. Those on the bank seemed to concern him not at all, for he turned, as was perhaps his long habit, to haul the vessel inshore himself.

But the rescue party forestalled him. The men from the bank, policemen and Indian scouts, seized the boat, while Ross's friendly hand was laid on the man's shoulder.

"The boys'll fix things," he said, in a voice deep with intense feeling. "Best come right up to camp, Steve."

The sound of the husky voice, whose words were not quite steady, brought a swift turn from Steve. For a moment he stared at the speaker. He seemed to be striving to restore the broken threads of memory. Finally he shook his head.

"No," he said. And turned again to the boat.

Ian Ross made no further attempt. He understood. He turned and flung all his energies into the work of unloading the tragic freight. The wild figure of Steve had prepared him. And, in a few moments, his pro-

fessional mind was absorbed to the exclusion of everything else.

Starvation had nearly defeated the otherwise invincible spirit of Steve. It was there in the bottom of the light vessels, in the drawn faces and attenuated bodies of the paddler crew of Shaunekuks. It was in the display of Steve's side-arms strapped to a strut of the canoe ready to his hand, with holsters agape, and his loaded guns protruding threateningly. It was in a similar display in the second boat, which the well-nigh demented July-man had commanded. Oh, yes. No words were needed to tell the story. It was there for all to read.

The rescuers understood the uselessness of questions. Help was needed, and it was freely given. The urgency of it all held them utterly silent, except for sharp, brief orders.

Ross and the two teamsters dealt with Steve's boat. Jack Belton and the camp scouts devoted themselves to the second.

In Steve's boat were the fever-ridden body of An-ina, and the scarcely living shadow of the child, Marcel. Ross lifted the half-dead woman and carried her up the bank to the tent which had been set up. Then he returned in haste for the child. On his way he paused for a moment to glance at the broken body of Oolak, who was being removed from the second boat by Jack Belton.

"Guess it's not starvation here," he said significantly.

"No," Belton admitted. "It's a bad smash, I guess. Say——"

The Scotsman glanced back at the river, following the horrified gaze of his companion. His big heart thrilled with instant pity, and he set off on the run.

Steve, wild, unkempt, was labouring up from the water's edge, hobbling painfully on feet that were bound up in great pads of blanket. He was bearing in his arms

the emaciated, unconscious body of the child, and his whole attitude was one of infinite tenderness, and care, and disregard for his own sufferings.

The doctor reached the struggling man and held out his arms.

"Give me the little chap," he demanded in his brusque fashion.

Steve turned his head. He stared at him in the fashion of a blind man.

"No!" he said sharply. Then he added with almost insane passion, "Not on your life!"

CHAPTER XI

STEVE LISTENS

"WE'VE got 'em beat."

The man of healing re-covered the sick man's feet with the blanket, and rolled the old dressings he had just removed into a bundle ready for the camp-fire outside.

"You mean——"

Steve was lying in his blankets propped into a half-sitting position. A candle, stuck in the neck of a bottle, lit the tent sufficiently for Ian Ross to complete his work.

"Why, the evil spirits of Unaga, I guess," he replied, with a forced lightness. Then he shook his head. "They did their best—sure. Another week or so and you'd have moved about on stumps the rest of your life. And I'm reckoning that would have been the best you could have hoped. It's been a darned near thing."

Steve nodded. His manner was curiously indifferent.

"How's the boy?" he demanded abruptly.

Ross put his instruments away and set the water bowl aside. Then he set the stoppered bottles back into his case.

"He'll be 'whooping' it up with the boys in a couple of days," he said.

"An-ina?"

"Beating the 'reaper' out of sight."

Steve drew a deep breath.

"Oolak was all to pieces," he said doubtfully.

"He was about as broken as he could be and still hang together. He's been a tough case." It was the doctor's turn to take a deep breath. "He'll be a man again. But I wouldn't gamble on his shape. Say, Steve, it's the biggest bluff I've seen put up against death. Those darn niggers who toted your boats, they're tickled to death with the food the boys hand out to them. And as for Julyman he's as near cast iron as—as—you."

"Yes, it was pretty tough."

"Tough? Gee!"

The doctor's final exclamation was one of genuine amazement.

"It's near three weeks since we hauled the remains of you from that skitter-ridden river," he went on, "and a deal's happened in that time. Jack Belton's gone in for stores, and to report. We've shifted camp where the flies, and bugs, and things'll let you folks forget the darn river, and the nightmare I guess you dreamt on it. You're all beating the game, some of you by yards, and others by inches. But you're beating it. And I'm still guessing at those things you all know like you were born to 'em. When are you going to hand me the yarn, Steve? When are you going to feel like thinking about the things that two weeks ago looked like leaving you plumb crazed?"

Steve knitted his brows. To the man watching him it seemed as if the sudden recalling of the past was still a thing to be avoided. But his diagnosis was in error. Steve became impatient.

"Oh hell!" he exclaimed. "Do you need me to hand it you? Do you need me to tell you the fool stunt I played to beat schedule, and get back to Nita and the kiddie? Do you need to know about a darn territory that every Indian north of 60° is scared to death of?

A territory only fit for devils and such folk, like the neches reckon it's peopled with? Do you want to hear about an outfit that found everything Nature ever set for the world's biggest fools? Do you want to know about storms that leave the worst Northern trails a summer picnic, and muskegs and tundra that leave you searching for something bigger than miles to measure with, and barren, fly-ridden territory without a leaf or blade of grass and scored every way at once with rifts and water canyons so you can't tell the north from the Desert of Sahara? If you do, read the old report I've been writing. I'll hand you a story that won't shout credit for the feller who designed it. But it'll tell you of the guts of the folk who stood behind him every darn step of the way, and made him crazy to get them through alive. If you'd asked me that two weeks ago I'd have cried like a babe. Now it's different. You've got a sick woman under your hands now, Doc, and two copper coloured neches. And when I say they're the world's best, why—I just mean it."

A deep flush of emotion underlaid the toughened skin of Steve's face. He was deeply stirred by the thoughts and feelings which the other's demand had conjured.

The doctor glanced down at the sheets of paper on which Steve had written his report. But he made no attempt to accept the invitation to read it. The moment had come to tell this man of that disaster which yet awaited him. So he had sought to test him in the only fashion that lay to his hand. The break which had so sorely threatened in the reaction following upon Steve's rescue had been completely averted, and the Scotsman felt that now, at last, he was strong enough to bear the truth which he had denied him on his first enquiry after his wife and child.

The flush died out of Steve's cheeks. The steady eyes were never more steady as they looked into the strong face before them. He ran his fingers through his long dark hair, and resettled his shoulders against the pile of blankets supporting them.

"It kind of startles you to find guts in folks when you're up against it. You can't help it. Maybe it's conceit makes you feel that way," he went on quietly. "Those two boys of mine, and An-ina. You couldn't beat 'em. Nothing could. When Oolak dropped over the side of a canyon, with most of the outfit the reindeer went with him. You see, we'd rid ourselves of the dogs. We couldn't feed 'em. Well, I guessed the end had come. But it hadn't. Julyman and An-ina took up the work of hauling, while I carried Marcel. Only they hauled Oolak instead of the outfit. They hauled him for nigh on a month, and we lived on dog meat till it got putrid, and even then didn't feel like giving it up. I didn't have to worry a thing except for their sanity. You see, they were Indian for all their grit, and—I just didn't know. It was tough, Doc! Oh, gee! it was tough! And when you've read the stuff I've doped out for headquarters you won't need me to talk if you've two cents of imagination about you. If you'd asked me awhile back, when I asked you about Nita, and my little girl, and you told me they were good and happy, and crazy to have me back, as I said, I'd have cried like a kid. Yes, and I guess you'd have needed a gun to hold me here while you hacked those slabs off my feet. But it's right now. My head was never clearer, and there's just one thought in it. It's to get back to Deadwater."

The doctor listened with a surge of feeling driving through his heart. His own words, the words he had told to the man whom he knew at the time to be floundering on the edge of a complete mental breakdown, were

ringing through his brain. He had lied. He had had to lie. And now——

He took refuge in his pipe. He knew he would need it. He filled it from the pouch which had become common between them and urged Steve to do the same. In a few moments both men were smoking in an atmosphere of perfect calm.

"You were pretty bad that time," Ross said steadily. "Yes, I don't guess you know how bad you were."

"I think I do—now."

The doctor seemed to be absorbed in pressing down the tobacco in his pipe. He struck another match.

"The strain had been so big the break must have come if you'd had to go on," he said, blowing smoke till it partly obscured his patient's unflinching eyes. "You were weak—physically. There was nothing to support your nerve and brain. It was in your eyes. You scarcely recognized us. You hardly knew what our presence meant to you. And, later, the reaction made things even worse for you. A shock, and the balance would have gone hopelessly. So—I lied to you!"

"You—lied to me?"

The pipe had been suddenly jerked from Steve's lips. He was sitting up. A sudden fierce light had leapt to his eyes.

The Scotsman, too, had removed his pipe. His eyes were squarely confronting the other. All his mental force and bodily energy were summoned to his aid.

"Yes. I had to lie," he said firmly. "It was that or carry you back to Deadwater a crazy man. I was the doctor then. Guess I'm a man now. Maybe you won't reckon there's a difference. But there surely is. You see, I'm not going to lie. I don't need to. Nita isn't at my shanty. She isn't at Deadwater. Neither is Garstaing. And they've taken your little girl with them."

"They?"

The man on the blankets had moved again. His knees were drawn up as though he were about to spring from the sick bed he was still condemned to.

Ross nodded.

"Yes." Then he pointed at the attitude of the other. "Say, straighten out, Steve. Push those feet down under the blankets. You're a big man up against disaster most times. Well, don't forget it. You're up against disaster now. Sit back, boy, and get a grip on yourself. It's the only way. I've got to tell you the whole rotten story, and when I've done I'll ask you to forget the way I had to lie to you. If you can't, why—it's up to you. My duty was to heal you first, and I don't guess there's any rules in the game."

Ross was talking for time. He had to be sure. He was ready at a sign to launch into his story, but he was looking for that sign.

And Steve gave it. It was the only sign the other would accept. Ross was a powerful man, and Steve was still sick and weak. These things are as well when a man knows that his purpose means the breaking of a strong heart. Steve slid his injured feet down under the blankets. His legs straightened out, and he leant his back against the pillow. But his pipe was laid aside, and a quickening of his breathing warned the other of the immense effort for restraint he was putting forth.

"Tell me," he said. Then he added with a sudden note of sharpness, "Quick!"

The Scotsman nodded.

"It's best that way. Garstaing and Nita bolted. They took your little girl with them. It's six months ago. When the Indian Treaty Money came up. Hervey Garstaing waited for that. The Indians never saw it. He pouched it, and beat the trail, as I said, with Nita

and the kiddie. Say, I needn't tell you more than that. I don't know any more except the police have been chasing his trail since."

He fumbled in a pocket, and drew out a sealed envelope addressed in a woman's handwriting, and another that was opened. The sealed envelope he passed across to Steve. The other he retained.

"She left these two letters in her room," he went on. "That's for you, and this one was for Millie. Maybe you'll read yours later. This one you'd best read now. It's just a line as you'll see."

He held the letter out and Steve accepted it. And Ross watched him all the time as he drew the note from its cover and perused it. The moment of shock had passed, and the fierce light in Steve's eyes had died out, leaving in its place a stony frigidity which gave the other a feeling of unutterable regret. He would have been thankful for some passionate outburst, some violent display. He felt it would have been more natural, and he would have known better how to deal with it. But there was none. Steve returned the letter to its envelope and remained silently regarding the superscription.

"It's a bad letter," Ross went on. "If I thought Nita had written it herself I'd say you're well rid of something that would have cursed the rest of your life. But the stuff that's written there is the stuff that comes out of Garstaing's rotten head. I'd bet my soul on it. She says her marriage with you was a mistake. She didn't know. She had no experience when she married you. She needs the things the world can show her. The North is driving her crazy. All that muck. It's the sort of stuff that hasn't a gasp of truth in it. If there was you need to thank God you're quit of her. No. That hound of hell told her what to say. Poor little fool. He's got her where he wants her, and she's as much chance as an

angel in hell. She went in the night, and they took a storming night for it. There was two feet of snow on the ground, and more falling. How she went we can't guess. There wasn't a track or a sign in the morning, and it went on storming for days, so even the police couldn't follow them up. The whole thing was well planned, and Garstaing took no sort of chances. He got away with nearly fifty thousand dollars of Indian money, and, so far, hasn't left a trace. We don't know to this day if he made north, south, east, or west. All we know are these two letters, that they got away in a 'jumper' and team, and that Nita and the kiddie were with him."

"Say, Steve," Ross went on after a moment's pause, his voice deepening with an emotion he could no longer deny. "I handed you a big talk of seeing your Nita and the little kid safe till you got back. We did all we knew. Millie and the gals did all they knew. Nita wanted for nothing. The things that were good enough for my two we didn't reckon good enough for her, and we saw she had one better all the time. Happy? Gee, she seemed happy all the time, right up to the night she went. And as for Coqueline she was the greatest ever. But he'd got her, that skunk had her, and the thing must have been going on all the time. Still, we never saw a sign. Not a sign. Millie never liked Garstaing, and he wasn't ever encouraged to get around our shanty. And we had him there less after Nita came. There's times I'm guessing it didn't begin after you went. There's times I think there was a beginning earlier. Millie feels that way, too. I know it don't make things better talking this way. But it's what I feel, and think, and it's best to say it right out. I can't tell you how I feel about it. And anyway it wouldn't make things easier for you. I promised you, and all I said is not just hot air. I'm sick to death—just sick to death."

Ross's voice died away, and the silence it left was heavy with disaster. Steve had no reply. No questions. He seemed utterly and completely beyond words. His strong eyes were expressionless. He lay there still, quite still, with his unopened letter lying on the blankets before him.

Ross was no longer observing. His distress was pitiful. It was there in his kindly eyes, in the purposeless fashion in which he fingered his pipe. He was torn between two desires. One was to continue talking at all costs. The other was precipitate, ignominious flight from the sight of the other's voiceless despair. He knew Steve, and well enough he realized what the strong wall the man had set up in defence concealed. But he was held there silent by a force he had no power to deny, so he sat and lit, and re-lit a pipe in which the tobacco was entirely consumed.

How long it was before the silence was finally broken he never knew. It seemed ages. Ages of intolerable suspense and waiting before Steve displayed any sign beyond the deep rise and fall of his broad chest. Then, quite suddenly, he reached out for the collected sheets of his official report. These he laid on the blankets beside the unopened letter his erring wife had addressed to him. Then he looked into the face of the man whose blow had crushed the very soul of him. Their eyes met, and, to the doctor, it seemed that mind had triumphed over the havoc wrought. Steve's voice came harshly.

"When'll I be fit to move?" he demanded.

"A week—if Belton gets back."

Ross was startled and wondering.

"Belton don't cut any ice."

"But we need the wagon."

The protest, however, was promptly swept aside.

"I tell you it don't cut any ice. I move in a week. That's fixed!"

For some moments Steve became deeply absorbed again. Then the watching man saw the decision in his eyes waver, and his lean hand move up to his head, and its fingers pass wearily through his long hair.

Then, quite suddenly, a harsh exclamation broke from him.

"Tchah!" he cried. "What's the use?"

With a great effort he seemed to pull himself together. He raised his eyes, and the pitiful half smile in them wrung the Scotsman's heart.

"Say, Doc, I'm—kind of glad it was you handed me—this. It's hurt you, too. Hurt you pretty bad. Yes," he went on wearily, hopelessly, "pretty bad. But I got to thank you. Oh, yes. I want to thank you. I mean that. For all you've done to help me. But I can't talk about it. I just can't. That's all. I don't guess you need to read the stuff I've written now. You see I'll need to make another report."

"Why?"

Ross's interrogation broke from him almost before he was aware of it.

"Why?" Steve's eyes widened. Then they dropped before the questioner's searching gaze. "Yes," he went on dully. "I'll need to make a fresh one. There's things— Say," he cried, with sudden, almost volcanic passion. "For God's sake, why did you get around? Why didn't you leave me to the dog's death that was yearning for me?" He laughed harshly, mirthlessly. "Death? There was better than that. I'd have been crazy in days. Plumb, stark crazy. And I wouldn't have known or cared a thing."

CHAPTER XII

REINDEER

IT was the hospital hut at the police headquarters at Reindeer. A cheerless, primitive place of healing, severe but adequate, as were most things which concerned the lives of the riders of the plains and the trail.

Steve was in occupation of the officer's ward, with its single bed, and its boarded floor bare of all covering and scrubbed to a chilly whiteness. For days he had contemplated its hygienic lack of comfort. For days his weary, ceaseless thought had battered itself against kalsomined walls, while his body, made feverishly restless, had sought distraction between the hard Windsor chair at the only table, and the iron bed-cot which seemed to add to his mental sufferings.

He had met his superior. He had supported the official half hour of congratulations upon work successfully accomplished and a fortunate escape from disaster without a sign. He had yielded to the post doctor's ministrations, and satisfied his curiosity with explanations which could never have been more matter-of-fact. He had been visited by two comrades of his own rank, who contrived, with the best will in the world, by deliberate avoidance of anything of an intimate nature, to display to him their perfect knowledge of his domestic disaster.

All these things he had faced with a heart crying out for mercy, but with an outward calm that left those whom

he encountered guessing. And something of the general opinion found expression in Superintendent McDowell's remarks to his subordinate, who filled the office of acting-adjutant.

"It seems to me, Syme, we needn't have worried a thing," he said. "Allenwood isn't the feller to get up and shout any time. He's the sort of boy to take a punch and come up for more. There's no woman got grip enough on him to break him to small meat. I don't guess there's anything could fix him that way—and after the way he made this last trip. He's quite a feller when it comes to grit."

"Yes, sir." Syme smiled into his superior's keen face. "Maybe he doesn't care. I've heard some fellers are that way after being married a few years."

The cynicism of the younger man drew a responsive smile in reply. But it also drew a very definite and decided shake of the head.

Whatever the general opinion, one man knew, one man had witnessed the momentary baring of a man's soul torn with agony, in the candle-lit tent on the banks of the Theton River. And now, had he been in Reindeer to witness, he would have understood the reality of suffering under the stern, almost forbidding front with which Steve confronted his little world.

Not a sign did Steve give. His habitual, shadowy smile was ready when he felt it to be due. He discussed everything that needed discussion with the apparent interest of a mind wholly unabsorbed. He forced a cheerfulness which carried conviction, and even drew forth such cynical comments as those of Inspector Syme. But under it all the agony of mind was something bordering on the insupportable.

The desolation of his outlook was appalling. And during his weary hours of solitude the hopelessness of it

stirred him to a bitterness that at moments became almost insanely profane. Shadows, too, crept into his mind. Ugly shadows that gained power with the passing of days. Had not such shadows come he must have been more than human. But he was very simply human, capable of the deepest passion subject to the human heart. Hate seized upon him with a force even greater perhaps than the passions that had hitherto swayed him, and hard on the heels of hate came a deep, burning desire for revenge.

His desire was not against the woman who had wronged and deceived him. A sort of pitying contempt had replaced the wealth of passionate devotion he had lavished. His whole desire was against the man. And, curiously enough, this fevered desire became a sort of palliative drug which left him with the necessary strength to withstand the pain of his heart.

Slowly at first it took possession of him, but, with each passing day, it grew, until, at last, it occupied him to the exclusion of everything. Even the thought of his child, that tender atom of humanity who had been a living part of him, and whose soft lips and baby hands could never again become anything more than a memory, was powerless to rob him of one particle of the cold delight, as, in a hundred ways, he discovered the broken, dead body of the man who had wronged him within the grasp of his merciless hands.

But none of this was outwardly visible. It was concealed with the rest. And so the cynicism of Syme, and the general comfort of those who came to cheer the sick room of a valued comrade.

So it came that one day, towards the end of Steve's convalescence, the Superintendent found himself occupying the solitary chair, with Steve lounging smoking on the be-patterned coverlet of the bed, talking of the Unaga

Indians and their habits of hibernation which sounded so incredible to the man who had never seen for himself.

Steve had a bunch of mail lying on the bed beside him. He had been reading when his superior had made his appearance. But his reading had been discarded while he gave full attention to the man under whom he had served so long and for whom he possessed no small measure of regard.

Steve had been talking in his deliberate, assured manner, and McDowell, alert, keen-eyed, half smiling had been listening to the story of a mysterious weed of marvellous narcotic powers. Curiously enough Steve had imparted only the briefest outline. He had told nothing of all that which he had read and discovered in Marcel Brand's laboratory. He had forgotten even to point the fact that he was a chemist first and only a trader through circumstances. There were many other things, too, that Steve omitted. Nor was the reason for the omission clear. It may have been forgetfulness. It may have been lack of interest. Yet neither of these suggested the reality.

"Well, it all sounds crazy enough, Allenwood, and I admit if Belton or Syme had told me the yarn I'd have sent 'em on leave to get a rest. But—anyway you've handed me a good report and it's gone on down to the Department without a word altered, and only my own comment added, which," he went on with smiling goodwill, "I don't guess I need to tell you about. Meanwhile I'd not be surprised if you hear things. Your seniority runs high. And this should hand you a jump—"

Steve shook his head.

"I'm not yearning, sir," he said. "But I need to thank you for your comments without seeing them. I can guess how they run—knowing you."

The Superintendent's eyes had suddenly become seriously searching.

"Not yearning? How—d'you mean?" he demanded.

A slight smile lit Steve's eyes at the abrupt change in the other's tone.

"You said just now if Belton or Syme had told you my yarn you'd have handed them leave—for a rest. I'd be glad for you to include my name with theirs."

"You want leave?"

Steve nodded.

"I'd be glad to have six months' leave pending resignation."

"But—resignation? You want to quit? You?"

McDowell was startled completely out of all official attitude. Such a thing as Allenwood's resignation from the force had never for a moment entered his thoughts. It would have been simply unthinkable.

"Yes." Steve was very deliberate. He picked up one of the letters at his side and tapped it with a forefinger.

"It's this, sir," he said. "You can read this, and—the others. I'd be glad for you to take them away with you and read them, and then attach them to my papers asking for my discharge. These letters were waiting me here, and there's quite a number. They're from my father's attorneys. You see, sir, he's dead, and I'm his heir. It's only a matter of some fifty thousand dollars and his farm in Ontario. But I'll have to get around and fix things."

"Oh, I'm sor—I see," McDowell had recovered from surprise, and promptly saw his advantage. "But resignation, Steve," he cried, dropping into an unusual familiarity. "Where's the need? You can get twelve months' leave, if necessary, to straighten these things out. After that you'll get back to us a Superintendent, and with money to burn. If you quit you'll be pitching

away years of big work. You'll be sacrificing more. With means like your father's left you you can get into politics, and then, through your official associations you don't need to get off the political ladder till you're tired. Man, it would be crazy. Think."

Steve folded his letters with precise care while McDowell pointed to the position as he saw it. Then he laid them together in a small pile. And all the while his eyes remained hidden from the other as though wilfully avoiding him. Nor, as his superior ceased speaking, did he look up.

"I have thought, sir," he said in level tones. "I've had days—weeks to think in. Yes, and nights, too." He shook his head. "A year ago the things you're handing me now would have sounded bully. A year ago I'd all sorts of notions, just like you're talking now. And I was crazy to get busy. That was a year ago. I'm still crazy to get busy, but—in a different way. I've got to get that leave, sir. I've got to make my resignation."

McDowell had suddenly become aware of an unusual restraint in Steve's tone. He had also realized the avoidance of his eyes. A wave of suspicion startled him out of his comfortable equanimity.

"You're entitled to your leave, you're entitled to resign your commission if you want to," he said with a quick return to his more official attitude. Then, with a sudden unbending under the pressure of curiosity and even sympathy: "I'm sorry. I'm darn sorry. You're the one man in my command I'd just hate to lose. Still—What do you figure to do?"

"Do?"

The sharp interrogation came with startling force. It came full of a world of suppressed feeling. Irony, bitterness, harsh, inflexible purpose. These things and others, which were beyond McDowell's estimation, rang in that

sharp exclamation. Steve laughed, and even to the Superintendent there was something utterly hateful in the sound that broke on his ears.

"Just forget you're my superior officer, McDowell," Steve cried, raising a pair of eyes which blazed with a frigid passion of hate. "Just figure we're two plain men, no better and no worse than most. You've a wife and two kiddies, both growing as you'd have them. A schoolgirl and a boy, and round whom you've built up all your notions of life. I had a wife and one kiddie, and round them I'd built up all my notions of life. Well, those notions of life are wrecked. They'd been building years. Years before I had a wife. To-day they're gone completely. I haven't a wife, and, God help me, I haven't a kiddie. And this because of one man. I've got to find that man."

The two men were gazing eye to eye, McDowell's darkly keen and questioning, Steve's full of irrevocable decision and cold hate.

"And when you—find him?"

Steve made a movement of the hands. It was indescribable but significant. His lips parted to speak, and, in parting, his even teeth were unusually bared.

"He's going to die!"

The words were spoken without emotion, without colour. They were quiet, and carried a conviction that left the other without a shadow of doubt.

"I'm telling you this, McDowell, so you shall know clearly what's on my mind." Steve went on after a pause. "Maybe you'll feel, as an officer of police, it's up to you to do everything to prevent what I intend. But I tell you you can't prevent it. I demand the right of a man from a man, a husband, and a father. I'm quitting. If you try to hold me it'll make no difference. You can delay. It'll make no difference. I shall quit—

eventually. And then I shall carry out my purpose. Get that. Then we'll understand each other."

"We do, Steve." A flush lit the Superintendent's cheek. A deep fire was alight in his dark eyes. "We understand each other better than you think. You'll get your discharge just as quickly as I can put it through. You hadn't said much, and I thought—but I'm glad you've told me as a man, and not as—an officer."

He stood up from his chair with an abruptness which betrayed something of his feelings. Steve held out the packet of letters.

"Will you take these, sir?" he said with a return to their official relations.

McDowell nodded.

"Yes. Say, about that boy and the squaw you brought down. You left them at Deadwater? It looks like some proposition. We'll need to hand them over to the Reserve missionary. It's hell these white men, when they get away north, bringing these bastard half-breeds into the world. What's the mother? One of those Sleeper Indians?"

For a moment Steve remained gazing out of the window at the view of the parade ground which the sunlight rendered almost picturesque. He was thinking of the two reports which he had prepared. The first one that had been the simple truth, and the second one which had been only partly the true story, the rest changed in view of his own position. A tender light for a moment melted the cold hatred of his eyes. He was thinking of the white boy which he had reported as the bastard of An-ina, with a view to obviate the official claim on him as a white child.

"Yes," he said. "And I guess we'd need to hand them over to the missionary for a while. But Doc Ross and his wife were crazy to look after them. You see, they've

a pretty swell place, and they're the best folks I know. I left them with them, and I'd say we can't do better, anyway for a while."

"Yes," McDowell agreed. "It'll make things easy. I'll put that into a letter to the Commissioner and it'll save worrying with the folk of the Indian Department. Well, so long, Steve. Yes, I'll take these letters, and put the thing through for you. But when you quit, for God's sake don't go and mess things. Don't queer one of the best lives it's ever been my good fortune to have under my command."

Steve's eyes were serious as he watched McDowell move towards the door.

"Don't worry, sir. The queering's done already. Whatever I do will be—well, just what I've fixed to do. No more and no less."

CHAPTER XIII

"ADRESOL"

THE horrible aroma of a gently smouldering smudge fire, battling with invading mosquitoes; the pleasant smell of tobacco, adding to the enjoyment of the crisp Northern air; the resplendent sunset, slashing a broken sky with a sea of multitudinous colours, and lighting a prospect of verdant woods at the foot of a line of distant hills; a wide, sheltered stoop with deep-seated rocking-chairs; these things were the key to the deeper recesses of the hearts of men who have learned to play the great game of life upon the lonely wastes of a Northern world.

Ian Ross raised a warning finger as the sounds of laughter came from some distant part of the house behind him. There was a child's laughter, fresh, happy, and the light laugh of a woman, who has learned, through her own, the perfect happiness which childhood can inspire in those whose instincts remain unimpaired.

"Do you need to ask me?" he said, in reply to the other's question. "That kiddie is just crazy with happiness—so's Millie. Guess she'll be down along after awhile, when she's quit fooling with him in his bath."

Steve breathed deeply, and his far gazing eyes rested unblinkingly upon the sunset of a myriad hues. The reek of tobacco hung upon the still air, and the light veil of smoke from the "smudge" sailed gently across the view beyond the veranda.

He was full healed now—outwardly. There was little change in him as he sat back in his deep rocker on the veranda of Ian Ross's house at Deadwater. His steady eyes looked out with their uncompromising directness. But there were lines about his eyes and mouth, and between his level brows, which had been less noticeable twelve months ago. This was the front which he set up before the eyes of the little world he knew. In moments of solitude, when no eyes were there to observe, it may have been different. But he desired neither sympathy nor support. He desired only to be left to himself, to those purposes which he would permit nothing to change or interfere with.

He had rid himself of all signs of his connection with the police force as though he had determined to cut himself off from a period of his life which had only yielded bitter memories. Nor had he anything about him reminiscent of the trail, which had been so much a part of his life. He was clad in the tweeds of civilization, which robbed him of some of that distinction which the rougher wear had always pronounced.

"I'm glad," he said, and went on smoking in the silent fashion which only real companionship understands.

After a few moments of voiceless contemplation of the wide view over the Reservation the Scotsman stirred in his chair. The thoughtful knitting of his heavy brows relaxed, and he glanced at the pre-occupied face of his companion.

"There's a heap of things I'd like to ask you, Steve," he said bluntly. "And a whole heap I wouldn't. It's the sort of position I don't generally reckon to find myself in," he added, with a twinkle in his deep-set eyes. "You see, I mostly know the things I want to say. Maybe you've got things you want to tell me, as well as things you don't. It's up to you."

Steve nodded.

"It's best that way," he said. "Yes, there's things I want to say. And it's mostly about the boy, and—An-ina. There's other things, too." He paused. Then he went on: "You see, Doc, I haven't made a heap of friends. There's about no one, except you. I'd like to talk straight out. McDowell's a decent enough citizen, but he's not the sort you can hand out some things to. Jack Belton and those others, well, they're good enough boys, but—Anyway, it don't cut any ice. You're just different and I want to hand you what'll maybe make you wish I hadn't. The first is just this. I want you to forget the things that's happened—to me. I want you just to tell yourself 'He don't care a curse.' It won't be the truth, but I want you to act as if it were. Those things are mine. Just mine. I've set them in a sort of grave, and it's only going to be my hands that open it, and my eyes that look into it. You don't need to avoid talk of Nita and little Coqueline if you feel that way. You can't open that grave. It's mine. And it's deep. You can't add hurt to that already done."

Steve's eyes were gazing unflinchingly into his companion's, and Ross's feelings were stirred to their depths by the stern courage underlying his words. He knew. He understood.

"Yes," he said. "I get that. It's best that way for—the man who can stand it."

"I'm going East," Steve went on, "and I'll be away maybe a year. Maybe less, maybe more. I can't say. You see, there's a big lot to be done, and it depends on how quick I get through. There's my father's affairs to fix up and—other things."

"Other things?"

"Yes."

Steve's eyes were on the rapidly softening colours of

the sunset. Their far-off look of pre-occupation had returned to them.

"I don't know how I'll come back," he went on after a moment. "Maybe in a hurry." His brows suddenly depressed. "I can't say. But it'll be for the boy and An-ina, and, anyway, it'll likely be the last time you'll see me on this earth. I don't need to tell you more on this thing. Maybe a time'll come when you'll feel glad you don't know any more."

"I think—I understand."

Ross breathed heavily through his pipe. He was thinking of the man, Garstaing. He was thinking of himself in Steve's place. And he felt it was more than likely that in that case he, too, might desire to return to his home *in a hurry*, and, perhaps, leave it again for the—last time.

"Sure. I guessed you'd understand," Steve said. "That's why I'm talking."

Again followed a brief, thoughtful pause.

"That boy," he went on. "It's him I want to tell you about. He's shown me how to get a grip on myself. He's a sort of anchor that's held me safe till the storm's blown itself out. He's been a sort of act of Providence, and the life that's left to me is for him. You get that?"

"I've had it all the time. Maybe you don't remember I tried to take him from you when you crawled out of that darn canoe."

A shadowy smile hovered in Steve's eyes.

"I remember it—good," he said. "Well, if things should happen so I don't get back I'll fix it so the boy gets all the stuff my father's handed me, and I'll ask you to raise him as if he was your own. You haven't a son, Doc. He won't be a worry. An-ina's his nurse, and he couldn't have a better. If I come back I'm hoping your Millie won't be too grieved at parting from him. Can

you fix that, too? You see," he added, "I'm asking you a whole heap."

"You can't ask too much, boy."

Steve's nod thanked the bluff heartiness of the big man.

"Good. Now for the things you don't know, Doc," he went on, his manner relaxing as he felt that his difficulties were lessening. "You didn't read the report I'd written. It told the whole story of the boy right. I tore it up after you'd—told me. I had to. If I hadn't, why, I'd have lost that anchor God Almighty flung out to me in my trouble. Next to my own little kiddie I love that boy. He's got into my heart good—what's left of it. You see, he's white, and he's no folks. That means the State handing him over to the folks set to deal with the 'strays' of God's world. It means his being out of my life when I most need him. I couldn't stand for that. If Nita and my little girl had been here it wouldn't have been that way. I'd have persuaded them to leave him with me. With no home to take him to I'd have no case. So I got busy on a report that made him out the bastard of An-ina and the dead trader. They can't claim him from his mother, even though she's a squaw. And anyway I've fixed it with McDowell they both remain with you."

Ross nodded prompt agreement.

"He's a bright kid and I'm glad. Glad for him and glad for you," he said heartily.

"I hoped that way," Steve went on quickly. "You see, Doc, I didn't tell you a thing till it was done. I was scared to take a chance." He sighed a deep relief. "The other things come easy with that fixed. I cut that report to the bone, and hid up all that concerned the boy. The work they asked of me was investigation into the death of two white men who were thought to be traders up in Unaga, where they didn't reckon there were any

white folk. So I told them a yarn that's simple truth, but which hid up all the things I didn't see putting them wise to. They guessed these men had been murdered by the Eskimo. Well, they weren't. They fought to the death for the mother of this boy, and she was a white woman, and the wife of his father. It was the old game. A game I hope to play. Only the other man was a partner in the enterprise, and not the Indian Agent of the Allowa Reserve. I told them of the Indians, too. A race that sleeps half the year."

"The boy's been talking of them."

Ross sat up. A pair of keen eyes were shrewdly questioning.

Steve nodded.

"I guessed he'd be talking of them."

"The old yarn of hibernating folks," the Scotsman said, his eyes alight with tolerant amusement.

"Just that. Only, it's no—yarn."

Steve had no responsive smile. His eyes were serious with a conviction that promptly changed the other's attitude. He searched an inner pocket and drew forth a neatly tied packet. This he unfastened while the other watched him curiously.

The wrappings removed, a bunch of something that looked rather like dried seaweed lay revealed. And a curious sweet odour made itself apparent on the still air.

Steve passed it across to his companion without comment. And Ross took it, and, for some thoughtful moments, sat gazing upon the strange product of the hidden Unaga. Then he gingerly picked up some of the shrivelled weed for a closer examination, and, a moment later, pressed it against his nose and inhaled deeply. As he did so, Steve, watching him, beheld a sudden excited lighting of his eyes.

"You know it, Doc," he said. "I don't need to ask."

Steve spoke quite quietly, and the other continued to contemplate the stuff in the intent, absorbed fashion of a suddenly startled scientific mind. At last he withdrew his fascinated gaze.

"'Adresol!'" he exclaimed. And his tone was thrilling with the joy of the enthusiast.

"Yes."

"You knew it?"

The Scotsman's sharp question was accompanied by the searching of astonished eyes.

"Sure."

Ross made no attempt to return the weed. It seemed as though he found it impossible to deny its fascination.

"Tell me about it," he said, fingering the stuff with the tenderness of an artist contemplating some precious work of delicate craftsmanship.

"It's the key to the hibernating yarn," Steve said. "Yes, I need to hand it you all. That way you'll understand the things I've got in my mind."

It was a long enough story. Steve was anxious that nothing should be omitted that could convince the only man who could assist him in carrying out his plans. Sunset had nearly faded out of the sky by the time it was finished. He told everything as he knew it both from An-ina and the mother of Marcel. Also that which he had learned first hand, and from the diaries of Marcel Brand. The story of the dead chemist who had abandoned everything, even life itself, in the pursuit of the elusive weed lost nothing from his wide sympathy. And the crude use of the drug by the Indians formed a picture full of colour and romance.

Ross absorbed it all, and wonder and interest grew in his mind as he listened to the story of it.

At the conclusion he re-lit his forgotten pipe.

"And it grows there—in plenty?" he said, in profound

amazement. "Steve, boy, do you know what it means to find a big source of that stuff? Oh," he cried with a rush of enthusiasm, "it means—it means the greatest thing for suffering humanity that's been discovered in a thousand years. Here, I'll tell you. Oh, it's known to us folk, who've studied dope as a special study. It's been found in places, but not in much bigger quantities than would dope a fair-sized litter of piebald kittens. It's sort of like radium, and half a pint of the distilled drug would be worth over twenty-five thousand dollars. Maybe that'll tell you how much there is of it on the market. But it's not that. Oh, no, it's a heap bigger than that, boy. The plant itself is deadly in the green state. It exhales a poison you couldn't stand for ten seconds. Dried, its poison is killed stone dead. But it leaves behind it its priceless narcotic properties. And these are perfectly innocuous, and even health-giving. I don't need to worry you with the scientific side of it, but it'll tell you something of what it means when I say it suspends life, and you don't need to worry about the condition of the person who's doped with it. You said those darn Indians live to a great age. I believe it. You see, they live only *six months of the year.* They're dead the rest. Or anyway their life is suspended. I seem to know the name of that man Brand. I seem to recall it in association with 'Adresol.' Anyway, the work he's done mustn't be wasted. We'll have to get an outfit. A big outfit that can't fail to grab the secret of those neches upon Unaga. There's no small crowd of folk has any right to deny the rest of the world the benefits of this wonderful drug. We——"

"That's how I reckon," Steve broke in quickly. "But the thing's to be done the way I've figured."

"How's that?"

Steve was sitting up in his rocking-chair.

"I didn't hand you that stuff and my story of these things for pastime, Doc. I guess I'd learnt all you've told me from the books and papers of the boy's father. Knowing you for the man you are, and the way you most generally try to make a ten-pound heart look like a sparrow's egg by shouting at folks, I reckoned you'd see with me in this thing. That poor feller Brand. As you say, his work isn't to be wasted. He's left behind him a kiddie which hasn't a thing in the world, and if I'm any judge of things that kiddie was the whole sun, moon, and stars of his life. I'm thinking of that kiddie now. And I'm thinking of him alone. You're thinking of a suffering world. If there's twenty-five thousand dollars for a half pint of that dope the money belongs to the helpless kid of the man who's given his life to locate it. We don't need an outfit to get the neches' secret. We don't need a thing. There's just one man knows how to locate the place where Marcel Brand lived, and that's me. There's not a living soul, not even Julyman, or Oolak, or An-ina, could ever make it without me. And I tell you right here there's no one ever learns it from me. That secret is for Marcel, and I figure to hand it to him, and all that's coming out of it. That's why I've told you these things. Now you'll understand what's in my mind when I say that I'm coming along back when I've settled with Garstaing, or failed to locate him. If I've settled with him I'll be in a hurry. And I'm going up north—north where no one can ever hope to follow me, with An-ina, and Marcel, and maybe Julyman and Oolak again, and I'm going to work this thing for the rest of my life for—Marcel. It's his, all of it. And what's left over is for the suffering humanity you're thinking about. See, here, Doc, you and me, we aren't any sort of twin brothers of friends. We haven't been raised together. I hadn't a notion of you till I took charge of this station.

But I know a man—a real man. And if you've the guts I reckon you have, then you'll help me to do the thing that's going to shut the gates of the hell that's opened to swallow me up."

"You mean the care of the boy and An-ina?"

"Till I get back. Then you'll hand 'em over without—a kick."

Ross ran his great fingers through his hair, while he sought the last glow of sunset for inspiration.

"It's a hell of a country—up there," he protested, after a moment. He was thinking of the child. He was thinking of Millie's possible protests at sacrificing the child to the terrors of Unaga.

"He was bred there." Steve's eyes were urgent. "It's handing to him the things his father would have wanted him to have. Think, Doc. By every moral right the 'Adresol' secret is his. It cost him a father. It cost him a mother. It would have cost him his life—a white man's life—if it hadn't been for the hand of Providence sending me along to him. Besides, it's all here, Doc," he went on tapping his breast. "He's been my anchor, my small, little anchor, but a mighty powerful one. He's saved me from all sorts of hell, and I want to hand him the life he's saved in return. I want to raise him to a great manhood, and hand him a future that'll stagger half the world. And if I fail I'll have done all a mortal man can."

The rustle of a woman's dress in the hallway behind them heralded Millie's approach. Ross stood up hastily. He was just a shade relieved at the interruption. In a moment the atmosphere was changed from Steve's passionate urgency to the domestic lightness of a happy wife's presence.

"Why, Mac," she cried, as she stood framed in the doorway, "you two boys still doping yourselves with smudge and tobacco smoke? That kiddie's only just

gone off to sleep. He's a terrible tyrant, Steve, and just the sweetest ever."

She glanced quickly from one to the other, and in a moment the smile died out of her eyes in response to the seriousness she beheld in the faces confronting her.

"You've got around in the nick o' time," the husband said. "Steve's going away—East. He'll be back in awhile. Maybe a year. Maybe more. And when he comes back he—wants the boy. He wants to take him right away, and to raise him as his own. He reckons he's kind of adrift now, and the kiddie looks like handing him an anchor. He's yearning to make good for him, in a way that, maybe we, with our own two, couldn't hope to. We're guessing it's up to you. A year or so, and then you—hand him to his 'Uncle Steve.'"

Millie turned to the man who had battled for the boy's life. Her kindly eyes were promptly lit with all a good woman's sympathy. She remembered the man's passionate devotion to his own. She remembered the terrible disaster that had overtaken him. Her thought went no further. At the moment it was incapable of going further.

She turned to the husband awaiting her reply, and there was a suspicious moisture in her clear smiling eyes.

"Say, Mac," she cried in her half tender, half humourous way, "by the way you talk folk might guess you were scared to death of the wife who didn't know better than to take you for better or worse. Steve doesn't need to worry a thing. You know that. I don't know the rights of his claim by the laws of the folks who're set to worry us. But there's God's claim that don't need lawyers to make plain. Little Marcel, bless him, is his. If he comes, night or day, one year's time or ten, God willing, he'll be here waiting for him, and I'll hand him over with two of everything for the comfort of his sweet little body."

CHAPTER XIV

MALLARD'S

THE ladder of crime has its bottom rung in Mallard's. Those who essay the perilous descent inevitably gravitate, sooner or later, at Mallard's. It was Saney who was responsible for the statement; and Saney was a shrewd "investigator," and certainly one of the most experienced amongst those whose lives were spent in an endeavour to beat the criminal mind of Eastern Canada.

Mallard's was somewhere on the water front of Quebec. It stood in a backwater where the busy tide of seafaring traffic passed it by. But it was sufficiently adjacent to permit its clientele swift and convenient access to the docks, at once a safety valve and the source of its popularity.

It was nominally a sailors' boarding-house. Heredity also conferred upon it the dignity of "hotel." Furthermore, its licence carried with it the privileges of a saloon. But its claims were by no means exhausted by these things.

According to Saney's view there was no criminal in the country, and very few of those who were worth while in the criminal world of the United States, who, at some time in their careers, had not passed through one of its many concealed exits. It might, in consequence, be supposed that Mallard's was a more than usually happy hunting-ground for the investigator of crime. But here again Saney must be quoted. Mallard's, he said, was a

life study, and, even so, three score and ten years was no more than sufficient for a very elementary apprenticeship. Further, he considered that Mallard's was the cemetery of all reputations in criminal investigation.

Outwardly Mallard's was no different from the other houses which surrounded it. It was part of a block of buildings which had grown up and developed in the course of a century or more. Its floors were several, and its windows were set one over the other without any pretence other than sheer utility. Its main doorway always stood open, and gave on to a passage, narrow and dark, and usually deserted. The passage ran directly into the heart of the building where rose a short staircase exactly filling the breadth of the passage. At the top of the eight treads of this staircase was a landing of similar width, out of which turned two corridors at right angles. Beyond these the landing terminated in a downward stairway, exactly similar to the one by which it was approached. Beyond this, all description of this celebrated haunt of crime would be impossible, for the rest was a labyrinth of apparently useless passages and stairways, ascending and descending, the following of which was only to invite complete and utter confusion of mind. The legend ran that the cellars, many floors deep, undermined half a dozen adjacent streets, and, in the block in which the place stood, no one had ever been found who could say where the house began and where it ended.

As a refuge for its benighted guests there was always a bed, of sorts, a meal and drink—at a price. If the visitor were legitimate in his claims on its hospitality he would fare no worse than a lightened purse at the time of his departure. If he were other than he pretended then it would have been better for him to have shunned the darkened passage as he would a plague spot.

The owner of the place was never seen by the guests.

It was administered, as far as could be judged, by a number of men who only intruded upon their clients when definite necessity arose. Then the intrusion was something cyclonic. On these occasions the police were never called in, and the nature of the disturbance, and the result of it, was never permitted to reach the outside. Mallard's was capable of hiding up anything. Its own crimes as well as the crimes of others.

On one of the many floors was a large sort of office and lounging-room. It had been extended, as necessity demanded, by the simple process of taking down partition walls. It was low-ceiled and dingy. Its walls were mostly panelled with dull, shabby graining over many coats of paint. The floor was bare and unscrubbed, and littered with frowsy-looking wooden cuspidors filled with cinders. There were many small tables scattered about, and the rest of the space seemed to be filled up with Windsor chairs, which jostled one another to an extent that made passage a matter of patient effort. At one end of the room was a long counter with an iron grid protecting those behind it. And, in this region, there were several telephone boxes with unusually heavy and sound-proof doors.

For the rest it was peopled by the hard-faced, powerful-looking clerks behind the iron grid of the counter, and a gathering of men sitting about at the small tables, or lounging with their feet on the anthracite stove which stood out in the centre of the great apartment.

It was a mixed enough gathering. There were well-dressed men, and men who were obviously of the sea. There were the flashily dressed crooks, whose work was the haunt of sidewalk, and trains, and the surface cars. There were out and out toughs, careless of all appearance, and with their evil hall-marked on harsh faces and in their watchful eyes. Then there were others whom

no one but the police of the city could have placed. There were Chinamen and Lascars. There were square-headed Germans, and the Dagos from Italy and other Latin countries. There were niggers, too, which was a tribute to the generosity of Mallard's hospitality.

Those at the tables were mostly drinking and gambling. Poker seemed to be the favoured pastime, but "shooting craps" was not without its devotees. There were one or two groups in close confabulation over their drinks. While round the stove was a scattering of loungers.

A dark good-looking man, with an ample brown beard, was amongst the latter. He was reclining with little more than his back resting on the seat of an armed Windsor chair. His feet, well shod, were thrust up on the stove in approved fashion. He was smoking a cheap cigar which retained its highly coloured band, and contemplating the brazen pages of an early edition of a leading evening paper.

A man beside him, an Englishman, to judge by the make of his clothes and his manner of speech, had a news sheet lying in his lap. But he was not reading. His fair face and blue eyes were turned with unfailing interest on the dull sides of the glowing stove. Occasionally he spoke to his bearded neighbour, who also seemed to be something of a companion.

"I can't find anything that's likely to be of any use to me," he said.

His speech was curiously refined and seemed utterly out of place in the office of Mallard's. "I quit London because—It seems to me cities are all the same. They're all full to overflowing, and the only jobs going are the jobs no one wants. Why in hell do we congregate in cities?"

The man beside him replied without looking up from his paper.

"Because we've a ten cent sense with a fi' dollar scare." He laughed harshly. "How long have you been out? Six months? Six months, an' you've learned to guess hard when you see Saney bumming around, or a uniform in the crowd. You've learned to wish you 'hadn't,' so you dream things all night. You're yearning to get back to things as they were before you guessed you'd fancy them diff'rent, and you find that way the door's shut tight, and a feller with a darn sharp sword is sitting around waiting on you. Take a chance, man. Get out in the open. It's big, and it's good. It's a hell of a sight in front of a city, anyway. If they get you—well, what of it? You've asked for it. And anyway they're going to get you some time. You can't get away with the play all the time."

"Yes. I s'pose that's right. It's a big country. and—" The man's fair brows drew together. The regret was plain enough in his eyes. There was more weakness than crime in them.

The bearded man tapped the page of the news sheet he was reading with an emphatic forefinger that was none too clean.

"What in hell?" he exclaimed. "These fellers beat me. Here, look at that, and read the stuff some darn hoodlum has doped out."

He passed the paper to the Englishman. That at which the other pointed was the photograph of a man. The letterpress was underneath it.

"Get a good look at the picture. Then read," the other exclaimed, while his dark eyes searched the Englishman's face.

He waited, watchful, alert. He saw the other's eyes scan the letterpress. Then he saw them revert again to the picture.

"Well, what d'you make out? Aren't they darn

suckers? Look at that job line in bum ink. Could you get that face from a Limburger cheese? And the dope? After handing you a valentine that 'ud scare a blind Choyeuse, and you couldn't rec'nize for a man without a spy glass, they set right in to tell you he's 'wanted' for things he did in the North-west two and a haf years ago. The p'lice have been chasing him for two and a haf years. They've never located him, and he's likely living in the heart of Sahara or some other darn place by now. And now—now some buzzy-headed 'cop' reckons he's got a line, and dopes out that stuff to warn him they're coming along, so he can get well away in time. Makes you laff."

There was irritation in the man's tone. There was something else besides.

The blue-eyed English crook was studying the picture closely.

"It sort of seems foolish," he said at last.

"Foolish? Gee!"

"Still, it is the face of a man, and a good-looking man," he went on. "And there's something familiar about it, too. I seem to know the face." Suddenly he looked round, and his pale, searching eyes looked hard at his companion. "Say, he's not unlike you. He's got the same forehead, and the same eyes and nose. If you'd got no beard, and your hair was brushed smooth——"

"Tchah!"

The bearded man reclaimed the paper with a laugh that carried no conviction.

"The courts 'ud hand me big money damages for a libel like that," he declared.

"Would they?"

The smiling eyes of the Englishman were challenging. The other shrugged as well as his attitude would permit, and, emitting a cloud of smoke from his rank cigar, pretended to continue his reading.

At that moment a stir recurred amongst the "crap-shooters" under one of the windows, and the Englishman looked round. His alert ears had caught the sound of Saney's name on the lips of one of the men who had ceased his play to peer out of the window.

He rose swiftly from his chair and joined the group. The man with the beard had made no movement. He, too, had heard Saney's name, and a keen, alert, sidelong glance followed his neighbour's movements.

The other was away some seconds. When he returned his breathing seemed to have quickened, and a light of uncertainty shone in his eyes.

"It's Saney," he said, without waiting for any question. "He's coming down the street. I should think he's coming here. He's crossed over as if he were."

"Alone?"

The bearded man's question was sharp.

"No. There's another fellow with him. He's in plain clothes. A youngish looking fellow, with a clean shaven face, and a pair of shoulders like an ox. Looks to me like a cavalryman in mufti. He certainly looks as if he ought to have a saddle under him. I——"

The other waited for no more. He was on his feet and across the room at the window in a twinkling. And the smiling eyes of the Englishman gazed after him. In the other's absence he picked up the paper which had fallen upon the floor, and looked again at the portrait of the man, and re-read the letterpress underneath it.

"Hervey Garstaing," he murmured, as though impressing the name upon his mind. Then he laid the paper quickly aside as the thrusting of chairs announced his companion's return.

The next few minutes were full of a tense interest for the man who had only just crossed the border line into the world of crime. The man with the brown beard

passed him by without a word. He thrust the chairs, which stood in his way, hastily aside. He seemed to have no regard for anything but his own rapid progress. He was making for the counter with its iron defences.

The smile in the Englishman's eyes deepened. His interest rose to a wave of excitement. He felt assured that "things" were about to happen.

A hard-faced clerk with the shoulders of a prize-fighter, was waiting to receive the hurried approach of his client.

These men were always alert and ready at the first sign.

The bearded man's demand came sharply back across the room.

"Guess I need to 'phone—quick!" he said. "I'll take No. 1."

The face of the clerk remained expressionless, but the tone of his reply had doubt in it.

"No. 1?" he said.

"That's how I said."

"It'll cost you a hundred dollars."

"You needn't hand me the tariff," returned the bearded man with a laugh that jarred. "Here's the stuff. Only open it—quick."

The onlooker saw the applicant dive a hand into his hip pocket and draw out a roll of money. He heard the crumple of paper as he counted out a number of bills. Then, in a moment, his whole attention was diverted to the entrance door of the room. The swing door was thrust open and two men pushed their way in.

The man who came first was of medium height and square build. He had a disarming, florid face, and the bland, good-natured expression of a genial farmer. The other glanced swiftly over the room. He was the shorter of the two, and his clean shaven face and his undistinc-

tive tweed clothing would have left him quite unremarkable but for his air of definite decision and purpose

The first man the Englishman recognized as Saney, head of the Criminal Investigation Department of the province. The other was a stranger.

From the newcomers, the onlooker's attention was suddenly distracted by the slamming of a heavy door. It was the door of a telephone box, and he knew it was the door of "No. 1," the use of which had cost his friend one hundred dollars. He looked for the man with the beard. He had gone.

Saney's inspection of the room was rapid, and every individual foregathered came under his eye. Then he stepped up to the counter and spoke to the clerk.

His voice did not carry to the rest of the room, but the clerk's swift reply was plainly audible.

"I haven't had a sight of him, if that's what he's like," he said, handing back a photograph. "Still, the place is here for you to go through if you fancy that way. You know that, Mr. Saney. It's open to you the whole time."

The officer's reply was inaudible. But the voice of the stranger came sharply.

"Guess we'll just have a look at the fellow that passed into that 'phone box as we came in," he said.

Again came the clerk's reply.

"There's no one in them boxes, Mister. I haven't sold a call in haf an hour," he said with a smile that lent no softening to his watchful eyes. He stooped and released a series of levers. "Get a peek for yourselves, gents."

Each door was set ajar and the stranger moved swiftly across and flung them wide open in rapid succession. The boxes were empty. At "No. 1" he paused considering. Then he passed within. And, for a few mo-

ments, stood examining the instrument, which was no different from any other 'phone in any other hotel in the city.

After the examination the two men passed out of the room and the Englishman watched the smiling contempt that promptly lit the eyes of the clerk as he looked after them.

Outside on the landing Saney led the way. Nor did the two men speak until they had passed down the stairs and out into the street.

"Well?"

Saney spoke with an ironical smile lighting his genial eyes.

"You'll search the place?" the other suggested.

Saney shrugged.

"If you feel that way. But it's useless," he said. "I said that to you before. You've tracked this feller to this city. You've tracked him to Mallard's. It's taken you nearly two years. We've all been out after him, and failed. You've succeeded in hunting him down to Mallard's. Well, I'd say your work's only just started. Maybe he's there right now. If we searched with a hundred men we couldn't exhaust that darn gopher nest. If we blocked every outlet we know and don't know, he could still sit tight and laff at us. No. We need to start right in again. So long as he's got the stuff, and hangs to Mallard's, he's safe."

"You might have those 'phone boxes torn down. I saw a feller go into one of them as we came in. I'd swear to that."

Saney nodded.

"So would I. A feller did go in. Maybe it was some guy that didn't fancy seeing me. Maybe it was your man. It wouldn't help us tearing out those boxes. We know them. 'No. 1' is a clear way out of that room.

Guess the whole back of it opens into some darn passage, which you could easily reach from anywhere outside that room. That's the trick of the place. Short of pulling the place down you can't do a thing that 'ud help. It's honeycombed with concealed doors, that in themselves don't mean a thing but a 'get out' of any old room. It's the whole place that's the riddle. Meanwhile it's a gravitating spot for crooks, and so has its uses—for us."

. . . . . .

The room was sufficiently large, but it was low ceiled and suggested the basement of an old-fashioned house. It was badly lit, too. Only an oil-lamp, on a table set with a cold supper for two, sought to discover the obscure limits of its tunnel-like length.

There was no suggestion of poverty about the place. It was modest. That was all. Its chief characteristic lay in the fact that it was obviously the full extent of the present home of its occupants. At the far end stood a bedstead, and by its side a large wicker hamper. The centre was occupied by the supper table, and, at the other end, under the window, which was carefully covered by heavy curtains, stood a child's cot.

For the rest there were the usual furnishings of a cheap apartment house, where the proprietors only cater for the class of custom which lives in a state of frequent and rapid migration.

A woman was sitting in front of a small anthracite stove. A book was in her lap. But she was not reading. Her deep violet eyes were widely gazing down into the fire glow through the mica front, in that dreaming fashion which so soon becomes the habit of those condemned to prolonged hours of solitude.

It was by no means the face of a completely happy and contented woman. It was a tired face with the

weariness which is of the mind rather than of the body. There were a few tracings of lines about the eyes and the pretty forehead which were out of place in a woman of her age. Only anxiety could have set them there. Suspense, an unspoken dread of something which never ceased to threaten. Now, in an unguarded moment, when all disguise was permitted to fall from her, they were pronounced, painfully pronounced.

Her thought was plainly regretful. It was also obviously troubled. Occasionally she would start and listen as some sound outside penetrated the profound stillness of the room. It was at these moments that her glance would turn swiftly, and with some display of anxiety, to the child's cot where she knew her baby lay sleeping. Once she sprang nervously to her feet and passed over to the cot. She stood bending over the child gazing yearningly, hungrily down at the innocent, beautiful three-year-old life dreaming its hours away without understanding of that which surrounded it, or that which haunted the mind of its mother.

Then the stove and the wicker chair claimed her again, as did the suspense of waiting, with its burden of apprehension.

At last relief leapt to the troubled eyes, and, in a moment it seemed, every line which had been so deeply indicative before was suddenly smoothed out of her pretty face. The woman sprang from her chair transformed with an expression of deep relief and content. She glanced swiftly over the supper table as a key turned in the latch of the door.

A man with a brown beard thrust his way in and glanced swiftly over the whole length of the room. It was the searching look of a mind concerned, deeply concerned, with safety. Then his dark eyes came to the woman's face which was turned upon him questioningly.

"Well?" she demanded.

The monosyllable was full of deep significance. It asked a hundred questions.

Just for a moment no answer was forthcoming. The man turned from the woman, and his eyes sought the child's cot. There was no softness in his regard. It was deeply contemplative. That was all. It was the woman who displayed feeling as she followed his gaze, and the lighting of her beautiful eyes was with swift apprehension.

"Something's the matter, Hervey!" she demanded sharply.

The lamplight caught the man's eyes as they came back to her face, and its rays left them shining with a curious, lurid reflection.

"Matter?" A sharp, impotent oath broke from him. Then he checked his impulse to rave. "Yes. See here, Nita," he went on, with a restraint which added deep impressiveness, "we've got to quit. We've got to get out—quick. Steve's hard on our trail. I've seen him to-day at Mallard's. He didn't see me. Only my back. But I saw him. He came with Saney. And there's only one thing I guess to bring Steve to Mallard's. Saney's never given me a moment's nightmare. But Steve—Steve back from Unaga, Steve in plain clothes in Quebec *with Saney*, and me sheltering at Mallard's, tells its own story to anyone with *savee*. It means he's got a hot scent, and he's following it right up. He's not the sort to let go of it—easy. It's quit for us—and quit right away."

Nita sighed. She passed a shaking hand across her forehead, and when it had passed all the tracery of lines had returned and stood out even more sharply.

"It's come—at last," she said, in a weary, hopeless tone. "It was bound to. I knew it right along. I told you."

"Oh, yes, you told me," Garstaing retorted, with a sneer that was always ready when anger supervened. "Guess you told me a whole heap of fool stuff one time and another. But you needn't reckon we're going to sit around under things, just because Mister Steve seems to put the fear of God into you. It's hastened the things I've had in my mind quite awhile. That's all. We're going to beat it. We're quitting for up north. It was my notion from the start. Only I weakened with your squeal about the country. Well, your squeals are no account now. We got to save our skins. I'm going to beat Mister Steve, and show you he's just the same as most other folks who've got a grip on the game. We're making north where, if he gets a notion to follow, he'll need to play the lone hand. And Steve on a lone hand can't scare me five cents. Up there I'll meet him. We won't need to live a gopher's life in a cellar. And when he comes along, if he's the guts you reckon he has, I'll meet him, and kill him as sure as Hell's waiting for him." The man's hot eyes were suddenly turned on the distant child's cot, and he nodded at it. "It's that makes me sick," he cried vehemently. "It's his!"

"She's mine!" Nita cried sharply. "And where I go she goes."

Nita read the man's mood with all the instinct of a mother. Three years ago when she brought Coqueline into the world the infant claim upon her had been loose enough. It was different now. Her woman's weakness and discontent had yielded her a ready victim to the showy promises and good looks of Hervey Garstaing. But the road they had had to travel since had been by no means easy. It had been full of disillusionment for the silly woman. They had lived in fear of the law, in fear of Steve, for over two years. And the grind of it, for the pleasure-loving wife who had buoyed herself with

dreams of gaiety and delight which her life in the North had denied her, had driven her back upon the elemental that was only latent in her. Coqueline was her all now. Nita clung to her baby as the one indestructible link with that purity of life which no woman, however fallen, can ever wholly disregard, or forget. The child was a sheet-anchor for all time. Whatever the future had in store, little Coqueline was her child, born in wedlock, the pledge of her maiden dreams.

"Tchah! She's his!" The man's restraint was giving before the brutal, the criminal, that was the essence of him. "Why in hell should I feed his brat? Why should I be burdened with it? Can't you see? We've got to drag her wherever we go, delaying us, an unhallowed worry, and a darn danger at all times. Cut it out. Pass her along to some blamed orphan outfit. Leave her to the mule-headed folks who guess their mission in life is to round up other folks' 'strays.' Steve's not a thing to you now, Nita, and never will be again. You can't ever go back to him. He'd kick you out without mercy, if I know Steve. He's hard—hard as hell. You're mine, my dear, mine for keeps. Steve don't want any woman who's shared her bed with another feller. You know that well enough. Well, say, be reasonable. Let the kid go. You don't need her. You and me together, we can play the game out. I can make good up there. And all I make you've a half share stake in. It's up to you, kid. Just say the word, and I'll fix things so that brat can get to an institution. Will you——?"

"It's no use, Hervey." Nita shook her head decidedly. But his coarseness, his brutality had had its effect. The violet of her eyes remained hidden lest it should reveal the terror that lay in her heart. "We've argued all this before. I'll go where you like, when you like, but—my baby girl goes with me."

The decision was irrevocable and the man understood the obstinacy which was so great a part of Nita's character. So he added no further pressure at the moment. Only his dark eyes regarded her while his thought travelled swiftly. At last, as he made no reply, Nita raised her eyes to his face. Her gaze encountered his, and she turned abruptly from the lurid reflection of the lamplight she beheld in his eyes, to the refuge of the child's cot, which never failed her.

Garstaing laughed. It was a coarse, hard laugh that meant nothing. He threw his hat aside.

"Let's eat," he cried. "Then we'll start right in to pack up our outfit. We're taking no chances. We got to be on the road north by noon to-morrow. We'll take the kid. Oh, yes, we'll take his precious kid," he laughed. "But God help you if things happen through it. You know what this thing means? If Steve and I come up with each other there's going to be a killing. And murder's a big thing beside pouching the Treaty Money of a bunch of darn neches."

CHAPTER XV

THE SET COURSE

DELIGHT and excitement were running high. It was a game. In Marcel's child-mind there was nothing better in the world. And it was An-ina's invention. It was the gopher hunt.

They often played it in the cool summer evenings. The gophers destroyed the crops of men, therefore men must destroy the gophers. It was the simple logic that satisfied the child-hunter's mind. Besides, it was his own game which An-ina had taught him, and no one else played it in the same way. Every dead gopher An-ina told him meant more food for the pappoose on the Reserve. And it was the child's desire that the pappoose on the Reserve should eat to repletion.

The game entailed the lighting of a fire. That in itself demanded a hundred excited instructions to the faithful An-ina, who contrived the fire unfailingly, in her quick Indian way, in spite of them. Then there was the collection of dried grass which demanded a search and laborious consideration as to its suitability. Then came the stuffing of it into a score and more of the principal holes in the selected gopher warren. During this operation strict silence had to be observed. Then the crowning moment. Erect, alert, in his woolen jersey and the briefest of knickers, the child took his stand in the centre, where, with youthful optimism, he sought to take within

his purview the numberless exits for the panic-stricken quarry. With stick raised, and every nerve quivering with excitement, he was there to do battle with the destructive foe.

So he waited whilst An-ina advanced with her fire brand. With rapid breathing and shining eyes the hunter watched as each plugging of dried grass was fired. The smoke, rising in a circle about him, left him a picture like some child martyr being burned at the stake.

Her work completed An-ina stood looking on, her beautiful dusky face wreathed in a smiling delight which the sight of the boy's happiness never failed to inspire.

A wild shriek. A flourishing and slashing of the stick. A scuttle of racing moccasined feet. The quarry had broken cover and the chase had begun!

A dozen gophers with bristling tails bounded clear of the smoke ring. They scattered in every direction. The boy was in pursuit. Shrieking, laughing, slashing, headlong he ran, nimble as the gophers themselves.

It was wide open grassland, and An-ina contented herself with watching from the distance. It was the boy's game. His was the chase. Hers was the simple happiness of witnessing his enjoyment.

"Gee!"

An-ina started at the sound of the exclamation behind her. She turned, and her movement had something of the swiftness of some wild animal. But it was not a defensive movement. There was no apprehension in it. She knew the voice. It was the voice she had been yearning to hear again for something over two years.

"Boss Steve!" she cried, and there was that in her wide, soft eyes which her aboriginal mind made no effort to conceal.

Steve was standing some yards away, with his horse's reins linked over his arm. As the woman approached

he moved forward to meet her. But his eyes were on the boy, still in vain pursuit of the escaped gophers, pausing, stalking, completely and utterly absorbed.

The woman realized the white man's pre-occupation. She was even glad of it. So, in her simple way, she explained.

"This—his game," she said. "He mak' great hunter," she added with simple pride. "An-ina tell him gophers bad—much. So he say Marcel hunt 'em. Him kill 'em. Him say Uncle Steve say all things bad must be kill."

"He still thinks of—Uncle Steve?"

The enquiry came with a smile. But the man had withdrawn his gaze from the distant child, and was earnestly searching the woman's smiling face.

"Marcel think Uncle Steve all man," she said quickly. "Uncle Mac, oh, yes. Auntie Millie, oh, very good. An-ina. Yes. An-ina help in all things. Uncle Steve? Uncle Steve come bimeby, then all things no matter."

"Is that so? Does he feel that way? After two years?"

"Marcel think all things for Uncle Steve—always. An-ina tell him Uncle Steve come bimeby. Sure come. She tell him all time. So Marcel think. He not forget. No. He speak with the good spirit each night: 'God bless Uncle Steve, an' send him back to boy.'"

The man's smile thanked her. And a deep tenderness looked out of his steady eyes as they were turned again in the direction of the distant, running figure.

"You come back—yes?"

The woman's voice was low. It was thrilling with a hope and emotion which her words failed to express.

"Yes. I'm back for keeps." Steve's gaze came back to the soft eyes of the woman. "That is, I'm going back to Unaga—with the boy. Will An-ina come, too?"

"Boss Steve go back—Unaga?"

A startled light had replaced the softness of the woman's eyes. Then, after a moment, as no reply was forthcoming, she went on.

"Oh, yes. An-ina know." She glanced away in the direction where the police post stood, and a woman's understanding was in the sympathy shining in her eyes. "White man officer no more. Oh, yes. No little baby girl. No. No nothing. Only Marcel, an'—maybe An-ina. So. Oh, yes. Unaga. When we go?"

There was no hesitation, no doubt in the woman's mind. And the utter and complete self-abnegation of it all was overwhelming to the man.

"You—you're a good soul, An-ina," he said, in the clumsy fashion of a man unused to giving expression to his deeper feelings. "God made you a squaw. He handed you a colour that sets you a race apart from white folk, but he gave you a heart so big and white that an angel might envy. Yes, I want you An-ina. So does Marcel. We both want you bad. Unaga—it's a hell of a country, but you come along right up there with us, and I'll fix things so you'll be as happy as that darn country'll let you be. Julyman and Oolak are going along with us. They've quit the police, same as I have. I can't do without them, same as we can't do without An-ina. We're going there for the boy. Not for ourselves. It's the weed. We got to do all that Marcel's father reckoned to do. And when we've done it Marcel will be rich and great. Same as you would have him be. There's 'no nothing' for me anywhere now but with Marcel. You understand? You'll help?"

All the softness had returned to the woman's eyes, untaught to hide those inner feelings of her elemental soul.

"An-ina help? Oh, yes." Then she added with a

smile of patient content: "An-ina always help. She love boy, too. You fix all things. You say 'go.' An-ina go. So we come by Unaga. It storm. Oh, yes. It snow. It freeze. It no matter. Nothing not matter. Auntie Millie mak' boy and An-ina speak with the Great Spirit each night. An' He bless you all time. Him mak' you safe all time. An-ina know—sure."

The frank simplicity of it all left the white man searching for words to express his gratitude. But complete and utter helplessness supervened.

"Thanks, An-ina," he articulated. And he dared not trust himself to more.

Diversion came at a moment when he was never more thankful for it. The shrill treble of the boy reached them across the stretch of tawny, summer grass.

"Uncle Stee-e-ve! Uncle St-ee-ee-ve!"

Little Marcel was unstinting in all things. His call was not simply preliminary. His enthusiasm for the hunt was incomparable with his new enthusiasm. His call of recognition came as he ran towards the object of his hero-worship, and he ran with all his might.

It was a breathless child that was lifted into Steve's arms and hugged with an embrace the sight of which added to the squaw's smile of happiness. The boy's arms were flung about the man's neck with complete and utter abandonment. An-ina looked on, and no cloud of jealousy shadowed her joy. She had done all in her power that the white man should not be forgotten in his absence. The great white man, who was her king of men. And she had her reward.

The first wild moments of greeting over, the boy's chatter flowed forth in a breathless torrent. And all the while the man was observing those things that mattered most to his maturer mind.

Marcel had grown astoundingly in the prolonged inter-

val. The promise of the sturdy body Steve had so often watched trundling across the snows of Unaga in its bundle of furs had developed out of all knowledge under the ample hospitality of Millie Ross's home. Tall, straight, muscular it had shot up many inches. The boy was probably seven years of age. Steve did not know for sure. Nor did it signify greatly. The things that mattered were the ruddy, sunburnt cheeks of perfect health, the big, intelligent blue eyes, the shapely mouth, and the sunny, wavy hair, all containing the promise of a fine manhood to come. Then the firm, stout limbs, and the powerful ribs. That which was in the handsome boyish face was in the body, too. God willing, the man knew that the coming manhood would be amply worth.

Slackening excitement brought the boy back to the thing which held his vital interest, and he told of the great game he and An-ina were engaged upon. He told of his failures and successes with impartial enthusiasm. And finally invited his "Uncle" to join in the game.

"No, old fellow," he said. "I've got to get right along down to the house to see Uncle Mac and Auntie Millie. You see, I've only just got along from Reindeer. Guess I've been chasing a gopher for two years and more. But like you I just didn't get him. Some day——"

"You been hunting gophers, Uncle Steve?" The childish interest leapt afresh.

The man nodded, and his smiling eyes encountered those of the squaw. He read the understanding he beheld there, and turned quickly to the child again.

"Sure," he said drily. "But I didn't get him."

"No." The boy turned regretful eyes towards the open, where he, too, had just failed to bag his quarry. "You kill 'em when you get 'em, Uncle. We do, don't we, An-ina?" he added, appealing for corroboration.

"We always kills 'em, Uncle Steve," he went on, "'cos gophers are very bad."

"Yes. Gophers are bad, old fellow. Always kill them. That's how I'd have done if I'd got the one I was after. But I didn't get him. He ran too fast for me. Maybe I'll find him another time. You never know. Do you? Boy and Uncle and An-ina are going a great long way soon. We'll find better than gophers to hunt, eh?"

"Yes—wolves! Where we go?"

"We go back to the Sleepers—and the old fort."

Steve searched the child's face anxiously as he made the announcement. He was half afraid of a lingering memory that might jeopardize his plans, or, at least make their fulfilment more difficult. But he need have had no fear. The child remembered, but only with delight. And again the man recognized the guiding hand of the squaw.

"Oo-o, Uncle! Soon? We go soon?" Marcel cried, his eyes shining. "The forests where the wolves are. And the Sleepers. And the snow comes down, and we dig ourselves out. And the dogs, and sleds, and—we go soon—very soon! Can't we go now? Oo-o!"

"Not now, but—soon."

Steve's satisfaction was in the glance of thanks which he flashed into An-ina's watching eyes.

"But now I must really go along to the house, old fellow," he said, with a sigh. "Guess boy'll come, too, or maybe he'll go on with his game?"

The question was superfluous. Gopher hunting was a glorious sport, but walking hand in hand with Uncle Steve back to the house, even though bed and a bath were awaiting him, was a delight Marcel had no idea of renouncing.

. . . . . .

The plump figure of Millie Ross half filled the doorway,

while the sunset sought out the obscure corners of the comfortably furnished hall place behind her.

The doctor's great figure was supported on the table on which he had flung his hat while he welcomed Steve. The latter's arrival had been quite unheralded, completely unexpected. So long was it since his going that husband and wife had almost abandoned the thought that some day they would be called upon to render an account of their stewardship with regard to young Marcel, and hand over the little human "capital" originally entrusted to them. It was not to be wondered at. They loved the boy. They had their two girls, but they had no son. And Marcel—well, Steve was so long overdue, and his absence had been one long, unbroken silence. So, all unconsciously, they had come to think that something had happened, something which had caused him to change his mind, or which had made it physically impossible for him to return. Now, after the first warmth and delight of the meeting had passed, a certain pre-occupation restrained the buoyancy so natural to the warm-hearted pair.

Steve was seated in the chair beside the table, the chair which the doctor was wont to adopt when the mosquitoes outside made the veranda impossible. Perhaps he understood the pre-occupation which more particularly looked out of Millie's eyes. He felt the burden of his debt to these people, a debt he could never repay; he understood the feelings which his return must inspire if the child, left in their care, had become to them a tithe of that which he had become to him. He knew it was his purpose to tear the child out of their lives. And the wrench would be no less for the thought that he purposed carrying him off to those regions of desolation which had already come very near to costing the child's helpless little life.

So his steady eyes were watchful of the woman's attitude, and he looked for the sign of those feelings which he knew his return must have set stirring. He knew that, whatever the big Scotsman felt and thought, the woman was the real factor with which he must reckon.

With this understanding he frankly laid bare much which he otherwise would have kept deep hidden. He told these two, who listened in deep sympathy, the story of his pursuit of the man who had wronged him, from the beginning to the end. And, in the telling, so shorn of all unnecessary colouring, the simple deliberateness of his purpose, contemplated in the coldly passionate desire of an implacable nature, the story gained a tremendous force, the more so that his pursuit had ended in failure.

He told them how for nearly a year, after winding up the affairs of his dead father, which had left him with even a better fortune than he had expected, he had systematically devoted himself to spreading a wide net of enquiries. In this process he had to travel some thousands of miles, and had to write many hundreds of letters, and had spent countless hours in the official bureau of local police.

He told them how finally he had discovered the trail he sought in a remote haunt in the poorer quarters of Winnipeg. This, after many tortuous wanderings and blind alley searchings, had finally led him to the waterside of Quebec, and the purlieus of Mallard's, where, under the guidance of the celebrated Maurice Saney, he ran up against the blank wall of that redoubtable harbour of crime.

"All this," he said, without emotion, "took me over two years. And I guess it wasn't till I hit up against Mallard's that I sat down and took a big think. You see," he went on simply, "I wanted to kill that feller. I wanted to kill that feller, and take my poor girl back,

and get back my little, little baby. I had a notion I might have to hang for the job, but, anyway, I'd have saved her from a life—well, I'd have saved them both, and been able to fix them so they didn't need a thing in life. What happened to me didn't seem to worry any. But when I hit up against Mallard's, and I'd listened some to Saney I started in to figure. To get that far had taken me over two years, and big money. There might be still years of it ahead of me. And when I'd done, was I sure I'd get Nita and the kiddie back? And if I did, how would I be able to fix them after all the expense? Then there was Marcel. Maybe it was something else urging me to quit. Something I wasn't just aware of. I don't know. I've heard say that a feller who yearns to kill, either kills quick or goes crazy. There wasn't a thing foolish about me. I hadn't any of the foolishness of a crazy man. Which is a way of saying the yearning to kill hadn't the grip on me it had. It was a big fight, but sense—or something else—won out. I quit for those other things I'd got in my head. Guess I heard that little feller's 'Hullo!' ringing in my ears. Same as I heard it up in Unaga. So I cut out the other, and got busy right away fixing things for the big play I mean to put up for the kiddie that Providence has left to me. There are times when my whole body kicks at the thought of that skunk getting away with his play. But there's others when I'm glad—real glad—I quit. I can't judge the thing right. I'm sort of torn in different directions. Anyway, there it is. Maybe the thing I haven't been allowed to do will be done sometime by the Providence that reckons to straighten out most things as it sees fit. I hope the way it sees is my way. That's all. Now I'm ready for the big play. My outfit has gone up by water on Hudson's Bay, a special charter. It's to be landed and cached on the shores of Chesterfield

Inlet. I've sunk every cent of my inheritance in it. It's an outfit that'll give Marcel and me a life stake in the work lying ahead. And all that comes out of it is for him. With all this fixed I got back right away."

"But not—in a 'hurry.'"

There was a half smile in the Scotsman's eyes.

"The only 'hurry' I'm in is to get all the season we need," Steve replied simply.

"That means you want Marcel—right away."

Millie spoke without turning from her contemplation of the view beyond the doorway. And there was that in her voice which told Steve of the inroads Marcel had made upon her mother's heart.

"I've thought of all this a whole heap," he said gently. "It's one of the things that clinched my idea of quitting. Later I don't guess I'd have had the nerve to—ask for Marcel."

Millie turned abruptly. And the husband was watching her as urgently as Steve himself.

"That's not fair, Steve," she declared, without attempting to soften the challenge.

"But, Millie—"

The husband's protest was cut short.

"Don't worry, Mac," Millie cried. "I know just the feelings that prompted Steve to think that way. But it's not fair. It's making out that I'd like to go back on my word, and refuse to give Marcel up to the moloch of Unaga. That's the part that isn't fair. Steve, if you'd come to me in twenty years my word would have gone every time. That boy might be my own son, I never had a son, and maybe you can guess just what that means to me when I say it. But there's bigger things in the world than my feelings, and I'm full wise to them. That boy loves you the same as if you were his father. I've helped to see to that. I and An-ina. You've been through

hell for him. You've been through a hell of your own besides. Now you're ready to give your all for him—including your life. Do you know what I feel in my fool woman's way? I'll try and tell you," she went on, forcing back the threatening tears. "There's men in the world made to give their everything for those they love. You're one of them. To rob you of an object for you to work and sacrifice yourself for would be to rob you of the greatest thing in your life. It would be an unforgivable crime, and though it broke my heart I would refuse to commit that crime. Marcel is ready for you the moment you ask for him. Oh, yes, it's just as I said. His outfit is ready. We've enlarged it as he's grown. An-ina has done her share. There's two of everything, as I said there would be—and a good deal over. But," she added, with a little pitiful break in her voice that showed how near were her tears, "I wish, oh, how I wish, it was not Unaga, and that, some day, I might hope to see his smiling, happy face again. You'll be good to him, Steve, won't you? Raise him, train him, teach him. Don't let him become a wild man. I want to think of him, to always remember him as he is now, and to think that when he grows to manhood at least he's as good a man as you."

PART II

CHAPTER I

AFTER FOURTEEN YEARS

IT was boasted of Seal Bay that its inhabitants produced more wealth per head than any other community in the Northern world, not even excluding the gold cities of Alaska and the Yukon. It was a considerable boast, but with more than usual justice. A cynic once declared that it was the only distinction of merit the place could fairly claim.

The boast of Seal Bay was sufficiently alluring to those who had not yet set foot on its pestilential shores. For once, by some extraordinary chance, truth had been spoken in Seal Bay. No one need starve upon its deplorable streets, if sufficiently clever and unscrupulous.

A photographic plate would have yielded a choice scene of desolation, if sun enough could have been found to achieve the necessary record. The long, low foreshore of Seal Bay was dotted with a large number of mud huts, thatched with reeds from adjacent marshes, and a fair sprinkling of frame houses of varying shapes and sizes. There were no streets in the modern sense, only stretches of mire which were more or less bottomless for about seven months in the year, and lost in the grip of an Arctic winter for the rest of the time. Foot traffic was only made possible in the softer portion of the year by

means of disjointed sections of wooden sidewalks laid down by those who preferred the expense and labour to the necessary discomfort of frequent bathing.

There was no doubt that Seal Bay as a trading port owed its existence to two spits of mud and sand on either side of a completely inhospitable foreshore. They stretched out, forming the two horns of a horseshoe, like puny arms seeking to embrace the wide waters of Hudson's Bay.

Within their embrace was a more or less safe anchorage for light draft craft. There was a pier. At least it was called a pier by the more reckless. It was propped and bolstered in every conceivable way to keep it from sinking out of sight in its muddy bed, and became a source of political discord on the subject of its outrageous cost of maintenance.

As for the setting which Seal Bay claimed it was no more happy than the rest. There was no background until the far-off distance was reached, and then it was only a serrated line of low and apparently barren hills. Everything else was a wide expanse of deplorable morass and reed-grown tundra, through which ran a few safe tracks, which, except in winter, were a deadly nightmare to all travellers.

The handiwork of man is not usually wholly without merit, but Seal Bay would have sent the most hardened real estate agent seeking shelter in a sanatorium as a result of overwork. Still, traffic was possible. Seal Bay was an ideal spot for robbing Indian and half-breed fur traders who knew no better, and the plunder could be more or less safely dispatched to the markets of the world outside. Oh, yes, there was easy money and plenty. So what else mattered?

These were the opinions of those who really counted, such men as Lorson Harris, head of the Seal Bay Trading

Corporation, and Alroy Leclerc, who kept a mud shelter of extensive dimensions for the sale of drink and food and gambling. There were others, those who came over the great white trail from the north, who possessed very definite opinions of their own, but were wise enough to refrain from ventilating them within the city limits.

A man who hugged to himself very strong views had just entered the city. He always came when Seal Bay was quite at its best. It may have been simple chance. Anyway, it was one of the coldest days of winter, with a sharp north wind blowing, and the thermometer hard down to zero. Seal Bay's sins lay concealed under a thick garment of snow, while its surrounding terrors were rendered innocuous by the iron grip of frost.

Seal Bay was astir. It always was astir when this man paid his annual visit. He excited a curiosity that never flagged. His coming was looked for. His going was watched. His coming and going were two of the most baffling riddles confronting the sophisticated minds of a people whose pursuits had no relation to purity or honesty.

The man came with three great dog-trains. Sometimes he came with four, and even five. His sleds were heavy laden, packed to the limits of the capacity of his dogs. They, in turn, were more powerful and better conditioned than any Indian train that visited the place, and each was a full train of five savage creatures more than half wolf.

He drove straight through the main thoroughfare of the town. The onlookers were fully aware of his destination. It was the great store-house over which Lorson Harris presided. And this knowledge set much ill-feeling and resentment stirring. It was always the same. The sturdy, hard-faced man from the north ignored Seal Bay as a community, and only recognized a fellow crea-

ture in the great man who wove the net which the Seal Bay Trading Corporation spread over the Northern world.

Something of the position found illumination in the dialogue which passed between two men lounging in Alroy's doorway as the great train passed them by.

"Gee! Makes you wonder if us folks has the plague," laughed Kid Restless, the most successful gambler that haunted Alroy's dive. "He don't see a thing but Lorson's. He'd hate to pass a 'how-dy' to a cur. But his trade ain't as big as last year. Guess Lorson'll halve his smile. He's been coming along fourteen year, ain't it?"

Dupont nodded, his contemplative gaze following the procession of sleds under the skilful driving of their attendants.

"Yep." Dupont was a lesser trader who lived in a state of furious discontent at the monopoly of the greater store. "The Brand outfit's been trading here fourteen years—and more."

"How's that?"

"Oh, ther's a heap queer about that outfit," said the envious whiskered man, whose dark, sallow features suggested plainly enough his Jewish origin. "Maybe it's that makes that feller act same as if we had the—plague. He calls himself Brand, but he ain't the Brand who traded here more than twenty years ago. Guess you wasn't around then. Guess I wasn't, neither. I'd be crazy by now if I had been. But the story's right enough. Brand—Marcel Brand—and his pardner traded here with Lorson more than twenty years back. He came from God knows where, an' he just went right back to the same place. Then him an' his pardner got done up. The darn Eskimos, or neches, or ha'f-breeds, shot 'em both up to small chunks. Lorson was nigh crazy for

the trade he lost, for all Brand was a free-trader like Lorson hates best. Then, three years or so later, along comes this guy with the name of 'Marcel Brand,' and carried on the trade. And he's a white man same as the other. It was then Lorson took to smiling plenty again."

"You figger he's the feller that?——"

"I don't know. I 'low' got notions though."

Kid Restless was interested. There was little enough to interest him in Seal Bay beyond the life of piracy he carried on at the card tables.

"It's some queer sort o' trade, ain't it?" he asked.

"Queer?" Dupont spat. "Oh, he trades pelts, some o' the best seals ever reach this darnation swamp. But the trade that makes Lorson smile is queer. I've seen bales of it shipped out of this harbour, an' it looks like dried seaweed, an' smells like some serrupy flower you'd hate to have around. Lorson just loves it to death, and I guess it needs to be a good trade that sets him lovin'. But he keeps his face closed. Same as the feller that calls himself Brand. Oh, yes, Lorson's the kind of oyster you couldn't hammer open with a haf ton maul."

"Why don't they trail him—this guy?" demanded Kid sharply.

"Trail? Why, the sharps are after him all the time. But he skins 'em to death. Lorson's at the game, too. Oh, yes. Guess Lorson 'ud jump the claim if he could get wise. But he ain't wise. No one is. But they'll get that way one time, and then that mule-faced guy, who guesses we'll hand him plague, will forget to get around in snow time. You can't beat the Seal Bay 'sharps' all the time, though I allow he's beat 'em plumb to death fourteen years."

"I'd guess it'll need grit to beat him," returned the Kid. "That is," he added thoughtfully, "if you can judge the face of a—mule."

"Oh, *he's* got grit—in plenty. Even Lorson gets his hat off to him when he's around."

Dupont laughed maliciously.

"You mean——?"

"I was remembering Lorson's play," the trader went on. "He had his 'toughs' that time. Brand had pulled out two weeks and more. Then one day a bunch of Northern neches pulled in. They'd beat down the coast in a big-water canoe. The folks didn't notice them. It's the sort of thing frequent happens. But Lorson got the scare of his life. He woke up next morning with his pet 'tough'—a big breed—lying across his home doorstep. He guessed he was dead. But he wasn't. He woke up about midday and started guessing where he was. Later on he handed out a fancy yarn what the neches had done to him. An', happening to dove a hand into a pocket, he hauled out a letter addressed to Lorson himself. It just said four words, an' Lorson spoke them. I don't guess they'd mean a thing to the likes of him. They just said, 'Play the darn game.' And under them was wrote 'Brand.'"

Kid grinned back into the other's eyes which were alight with malicious delight.

"That's the med'cine to hand a feller that can understand white—not Lorson," the gambler said. "I like that guy that calls himself 'Brand.'"

"Guess he's some boy all right. But—I was thinkin' of that breed. He was doped."

The other nodded.

"You're guessing about that—queer trade," he said.

Dupont gazed out in the direction whence the dog train had disappeared behind the group of great frame buildings which represented the establishment of the Seal Bay Trading Corporation.

"Yep," he said thoughtfully.

. . . . . .

Lorson Harris was a type common enough in outland places, where money is easy and conscience does not exist. He was vulgar, he was brutal, he was a sensualist in his desire for all that wealth could buy him. He was not a man of education. Far from it. He was a clever, unscrupulous schemer, a product of conditions—rough conditions.

He was a large, coarse man who had permitted his passions to gain the upper hand in the control of his life, but they by no means interfered with his capacity as the head of the Seal Bay Trading Corporation.

He overflowed a big armchair before his desk in the office of his great store, and beamed a hard-breathing good-nature upon all those who seemed likely to be useful in his multitudinous schemes. Just now the victim of his smile was a man at the zenith of middle life. He was of medium height, but of herculean muscle, and the fact was patent enough even under the dense bulk of fur-lined buckskin clothing he was wearing.

There was no more sympathy in the two men's appearance than there was in their condition of mind. While a passionate desire for the flesh-pots enjoyed by other magnates of commerce, whose good fortune had provided them with a happier hunting-ground than Seal Bay, was the primal motive power of the trader, the man who had just come off the great white trail was driven by a desire no less strong, but only selfish in that the final achievement should be entirely his.

Just now the fur cap was removed from the visitor's head, and a tingeing of grey was apparent in the shock of brown hair he had bared. A few sharp lines scored his forehead and played about his clean-shaven mouth, but

the steady, serious eyes, with their strongly marked, even brows were quite devoid of all sign of passing years. They accentuated the impression of tremendous vigour and capacity his personality conveyed.

The smiling eyes of Lorson read all these things. It was his business to read his visitors. He pushed the cigar box across the desk invitingly.

"They're some cigars, boy," he said complacently. "Try one."

The other shook his head.

"Don't use 'em, thanks. Maybe I'll try my pipe."

"Sure. Do. A horn of whisky—imported Scotch?"

The same definite shake of the head followed, but before the visitor could pass a verbal negative the trader laughed.

"Nothing doing?" he said amiably. "Well, maybe you're right. You boys need fit stomachs. Drink's a darn fool play, but—Here's 'how,'" he added, as he gulped down the dash of spirit he had poured out for himself. He smacked his heavy, appreciative lips, and fondly contemplated the label on the bottle. But he was not really reading it.

"Your trade in the dope's growing," he said, his fat fingers fondling the glass bottle neck as though he were loth to release it. "Nearly fifty thousand dollars. That's your credit for a year's trade. It's the biggest in—fourteen years. And it don't begin to touch the demand I got for the darn stuff. I could sell you a hundred thousand dollars' worth, and still ask for more at the same price. You don't get what that means to me," he went on, with a laugh intended to be disarming. "You ain't running a great store that's crazy to hand out dividends. Here's a market gasping. Prices are sky high, an' we can't 'touch.' I tell you it wouldn't lower the price a

haf cent if you quadrupled your output. I want to weep. I sure do."

The man in buckskin was filling his pipe from a bag of Indian manufacture.

"Sure," he nodded. "I get that." Then he added very deliberately. "That's why you send your boys out scouting my trail."

Lorson laughed immoderately to hide the effect of the quietly spoken challenge.

"That's business, boy. I buy your stuff—all you can hand me. But if I can jump into your market, why—it's up to me."

"It certainly is up to you." The man lit his pipe and pressed down the tobacco with one of his powerful fingers. "It's up to you more than you know. I once sent back one of your boys. I shan't worry to send back any more. Best save their skins whole, Harris. You'll never jump my market till you can find a feller who can hit a trail such as you never dreamed of. And it's a trail they got to locate first."

The trader leant back in his chair and linked his fat fingers across his wide stomach. His eyes were twinkling as he regarded the visitor from the North. The smile was still in them, but there was a keen speculation in them, too.

"You can't blame me, boy," he said, with perfect amiability. "Hand me all the stuff I'm asking, and your market's as sacred as a woman's virtue. But you don't hand it me, or maybe you can't. Well, it's up to me to supply my needs any way I know. There's nothing crooked in that. If you're reckoning to squeeze my market you can't kick if I try to open it wide. You see, Brand, this stuff *grows*. I guess it grows in plenty, because you admit you trade it, and I know the Northern neche well enough to guess he only trades sufficient for

his needs. See? Well, I've the same right you have to get on to that source. If you know it, hand me what I'm asking for. If you don't, then you can't stop me trying to locate it for myself. If all business propositions were as straight as that there'd be no kick coming to anyone. As it is, the man who's got a kick is me—not you."

"I get all that," the visitor said, without relaxing his attention. "There's no kick on the moral side of this thing. I never said there was. I said save your boys' skins whole. That's all. If you fancy jumping my claim, jump it, but I guess I don't need to tell you what to expect. You sit around here and order other folks to the job. It's they who're going to suffer. Not you."

"I pay them. They take it on with their darn eyes open," snapped the trader, his amiability slipping from him in a moment.

The other gathered a half smile at the display. He blew a great cloud of smoke, and removed his pipe.

"I'd best tell you something I haven't seen necessary to tell you before," he said. "And it's because I'm not yearning for any feller to get hurt in this thing. And, further, I'm telling you because you'll see the horse sense in cutting out sharp business for real business. There's a big source of this stuff. Oh, yes. I know that. I've been chasing it for fourteen years, and—I haven't found it. When I do—if I do, I'll hand you all you need, and save that weep you threatened. Meanwhile you're sinking dollars in a play that maybe fits your notion of business, but is going to snuff out uselessly the lights of some of your boys, who I agree 'ud be better off the earth. Here's where the horse sense comes in. I know all about this stuff, all there is to know. I know the folks, all of them, who can supply me. They wouldn't trade with your folks. They wouldn't trade with a soul

but me. This is simple fact, and no sort of bluff. But the whole point is that I—I wish an outfit ready to face anything the North can hand me, with the confidence of the folks who know the source, have been chasing for it fourteen years and failed, while you, with a bunch of toughs who couldn't live five minutes on one of my winter trails, are guessing to do something that for fourteen years has beaten me. That's the horse sense I want to hand you, and I'm only handing it you so you don't pitchfork any more lives into the trouble that's waiting on them. They won't find it. I'll see to that, and what I don't see to the Northern trail will. If you don't see the sense of this, it's up to you, and anyway, as I'm needing to pull out early, I'll take a draft on the bank for those dollars. I'll be along down again this time next year."

He rose from his chair preparatory to departure, and picked up the warm seal cap he had flung aside.

For a moment the trader sat lost in thought. Then, quite suddenly, he stirred, and reached the check book lying on the desk. He wrote rapidly, and finally tore the draft from its counterfoil and blotted it. Then he looked up, and his smiling amiability was uppermost once more.

"Thanks, Brand," he said. "I'm not sure you aren't right. It's hoss sense anyway. You aren't given to talk most times. I wanted to know how you stood about that stuff. I'm glad you told me. What's more, I guess it's true. Still, what I figger to do in the future don't concern anyone but me. All I can say is I built this enterprise up on a definite hard rule. I never compromise with a rival trading concern, particularly with a free-trading outfit. I trade with 'em, but I'm out to beat 'em all the time."

The other accepted the draft and signed a receipt. Then he thrust his cap over his head and his steady eyes smiled down into the amiable face smiling up at him.

"That's all right, Harris," he said easily. "The feller who don't know wins a pot now and again. But it's the feller who knows wins in the long run. You back the game if you feel that way. You won't hand me a nightmare. Later you'll wake up and get a fresh dream. The game's lost before you start. So long."

. . . . . .

Alroy Leclerc beamed on the man who was perhaps the greatest curiosity amongst the many to be found in Seal Bay. His "hotel" had sheltered the trader, who called himself Brand, for three days. A fact sufficiently unusual to stir the saloon-keeper to a high pitch of cordiality. For all his most liberal sources of revenue came from the scallywags of the town, Alroy, with sound instinct, infinitely preferred the custom of the stable men of the Northern world. Brand was more than desirable.

It was early morning. Much too early for Alroy. He felt lonely in the emptiness of the place. A grey daylight, peering in through the window of the office, scarcely lit the remote corners of the room. Brand had breakfasted by lamplight. The saloon-keeper was more than thankful for the comforting warmth of the great wood stove they were standing over.

"Guess it looks like bein' our last real cold snap," Alroy said, by way of making talk with a man who was always difficult. "We'll be running into May in a week. 'Tain't as easy with your folks. We git the warm wind of this darn old bay, with all that means, which," he added with a laugh, "is mostly rain. You'll be runnin' into cold right up to July."

The man from the trail was unrolling a bundle of notes for the settlement of the bill Alroy had presented. He glanced up with a smiling amusement in his eyes.

"Guess that's as may be," he said indifferently. "We get fancy patterns where I come from."

He passed the account and a number of bills to the other, and returned his roll to his pocket.

"And wher' may that be?" enquired the saloon-keeper, with as much indifference as his curiosity would permit.

"Just north," returned the other. "Guess you'll find that right. Twenty-five fifty. I'll take a receipt."

Alroy turned hastily to the table supporting the hotel register, and, producing an ornate fountain pen, forthwith prepared to scratch a receipt, which was rarely enough demanded by his customers amongst the trail men.

"Sure," Brand went on, while the other bent over his unaccustomed work. "We get all sorts. You can't figger anything this time of year, except it'll be a hell of a sight more cussed than when winter's shut down tight. I once knew a red hot chinook that turned the whole darn country into a swamp in April, and never let it freeze up again. I once broke trail at Fort Duggan at the start of May on open water with the skitters running, like mid-summer."

Alroy looked up.

"Duggan?" he questioned sharply. "That's the place Lorson opened up last spring. It's right on the edge of a territory they call Unaga, ain't it? The boys were full of it last summer and were guessing what sort of murder lay behind his play."

Brand took the receipt the other handed him and folded it. He thrust it into a pocket inside his fur-lined tunic.

"Why?" he demanded, in the curt fashion that seemed so natural to him.

"Why?" Alroy laughed. "Well, the boys around here guess they know Lorson Harris, and ain't impressed with his virtues. You see, Fort Duggan, they reckon, is

a bum sort of location, eaten up by bugs an' a poor sort of neche race. There's an old fort there, ain't there? One o' them places where a hundred an' more years ago the old fur-traders stole, and looted, and murdered the darn neches, and mostly drank themselves to death when they didn't do it by shootin'. That don't figure a heap in the boys' reckonin'. What does, is the feller Lorson sent there. The yarn goes that this feller Nicol—David Nicol—that's his name, I reckon, has been working for the Seal Bay Trading for some years. He seems to be some crook, and Harris found him out. Guess he seems to have cost the Seal Bay outfit a big bunch of money. They were all for sending him down for penitentiary. Then a sort of miracle happened. Lorson begged off. Why? It ain't usually Lorson's way. Next thing happens is Lorson opens up Fort Duggan, and puts the tough in. So the boys are guessin'. There sure is some sort of murder behind it. Lorson don't miss things. His chances are mostly a cinch."

"Yes, he's pretty wise." The thoughtful eyes of the trail man were turned on the sides of the glowing stove so that the saloon-keeper had no chance of observing them. "You can't guess the things behind Lorson's smile," he went on. "But I reckon you can figger there's always something. As far as I can recollect of Fort Duggan—and I haven't been there these years—I'd say he's no mean judge. I always wondered when a big corporation would come along and open it up. There's big trade there in pelts. Still, it's a tough sort of place."

"From what I hear it can't be too tough for the feller Lorson's sent there. There'll be blood and murder amongst the neches there if they don't hand over easy."

Alroy laughed immoderately at the prospect he contemplated, and held out his hand in friendly farewell as his customer prepared to depart.

"Well, so long, Mister," he grinned amiably. "I guess there's things worse in the world than the shelter of this old shanty. Anyway I'd sooner you hit the Northern trail than me. I'll be mighty pleased to see you around come—next year."

"So long."

Alroy's cordiality found very little that was responsive in the other. Perhaps the trail man understood its exact value. Perhaps he was simply indifferent. The saloon-keeper served a purpose, and was amply paid for his service. Anyway he shook hands, and departed without any other response.

Alroy watched him go. There was nothing else to do at this early hour with his entire establishment still abed, and Seal Bay's main thoroughfare still a desert of dirty, rutted snow, some foot or more deep. He stood in his doorway gazing out at the cheerless grey of early morning, watching with interest the handling of the three great dog trains which he had seen come into town with their laden sleds only three days before.

For all the cold and the early morning drear, for all he was of the life of the desolate shores of Seal Bay, for all the comings and goings of the men of the trails, for whom he mostly entertained a more or less profound contempt, for Alroy Leclerc there was still a fascination attached to the mysterious beyond to which these people belonged. Somewhere out there was a great white world whose secrets he could only guess at. The life was a life he did not envy. He knew it by the thousand and one stories of disaster and miraculous escape he had listened to, but that was all. There was more in it, he knew. Much more. It held fascinated the adventurous, untamed spirits of men whose superhuman efforts, yielding them little better than a pittance, still made possible the enormous profits of a parasitic world which battened upon

them, and sucked them dry. Oh, yes. Whatever his sympathies he had a pretty wide understanding of the lives of these men. He also knew that he was one of the parasites which battened upon them. But he had no scruples. Nor had he envy. Only a sort of fascination which never failed at the sight of a sled, and a powerful train of well-handled dogs.

It was that which he looked upon now. He watched the two Indians stir the savage creatures from their crouching upon the snow. It was the harsh law of the club administered by skilled but merciless hands. The great, grey beasts, fully half wolf, understood nothing more gentle.

In moments only the whole of the three trains were alert and ready on their feet straining against the raw-hide breast draws of their harness. Then the white man shouted the word to "mush." The long hardwood poles of the men broke out the sleds from the frozen grip of snow, and the whole of the lightened outfit dashed off at a rapid, almost headlong gait.

For a few moments Alroy remained at his post gazing after them. Then of a sudden his attention was drawn in an opposite direction.

It was an incoming train. A single sled, heavily laden, but with only a team of three dogs, far inferior to those which had just passed out of the town. They cut into the main thoroughfare out of a side turning and headed at once for the store of the Seal Bay Trading Company.

He looked for the owner. The owner was always his chief interest. He anticipated that a liberal share of the value of the man's cargo would find its way across his counter, and the extent of his profit would depend on the man's identity.

He was destined to receive the surprise of his life. He

looked for an Indian, a half-breed, or a white man. Some well-known man of the trail. But it was none of these. Despite the fur-lined tunic almost to the knees, despite the tough, warm nether garments, and the felt leggings, and beaded moccasins, and the well-strung snowshoes, there remained no doubt in his startled mind. None whatsoever. It was a woman! A girl!

Alroy ran a hand across his astonished eyes. He pushed back his fur cap and stared. The girl was moving down the trail towards him. He had a full view of the face looking out of the fur hood which surrounded it. A white girl, with the heightened colour and brightening eyes of youth and perfect health and strength. She was tall, beautifully tall, and as she swept on past him in her gliding snow-shoes he had a fleeting vision of a strand of fair hair escaped from beneath her fur hood, and a pair of beautiful blue eyes, and pretty, parted lips which left him hugging himself.

The vision had rewarded him for his early rising.

CHAPTER II

THE SPRING OF LIFE

IT was a moment when memories were stirring. An-ina searched the distance with eyes untroubled and full of a glad content Had she not every reason for content? Oh, yes. She knew.

It was the same scene she had gazed upon for many seasons, for many years, and the limit of her vision had become practically the limits of her world. There stretched the white snow-clad valley with the still frozen river winding its way throughout its length to the north and south. There were the far-off hills beyond, white, grey, and purpling as the distance gained. Dark forest patches chequered the prospect. It was the same all ways, north, south, and west.

For all the few changings of aspect with the passing of the seasons there was no weariness in the woman's heart. She was bound up to the exclusion of all else with the human associations which were hers. No prison could hold bondage for her, so long as those associations were not denied her.

Out of the tail of her eyes she glanced at the great figure that was standing near her in the gateway of the fort. It was a figure, the sight of which filled her with a great sense of pride, and joy, and gratitude. In her simple way she understood something of the debt owed her for her years of untiring, watchful care of the small

body which had grown to such splendid manhood. But the thought of its discharge never occurred to her uncalculating mind. That which she beheld more than repaid.

Marcel was great for Indian eyes to gaze upon. Tall as was the woman, comely in her maturing years, she was left dwarfed beside the youthful manhood she had watched grow from its earliest days. The young man had the erect, supple, muscular body of a trained athlete and the face of the mother who had long since been laid to rest in the woods of the Sleeper Indians. He had moreover the strength of the father's unspoiled character, and all the purposeful method which the patient upbringing of "Uncle Steve" had been capable of inspiring. He was a simple human product, unspoiled by contamination with the evil which lurks under the veneer of civilization, yet he possessed all the trained mind that both Steve and he had been able to achieve from the wealth of learning which his father's laboratory had been found to contain.

Beyond this, the bubbling springs of youth were in full flood, and the tide ran strong in his rich veins. A passionate enthusiasm was the outlet for this tide. A buoyant, fearless energy, a youthful pride in strenuous achievement. It was with these he faced the bitterness of the cruel Northland which he had grown to look upon like the Indians, who knew no better, as the whole setting of human life and all that was to be desired.

He was a hunter and a man of the trail before all things. His every thought was wrapt up in the immensity of the striving. He had absorbed the teachings of Steve, and added to them his own natural instincts. And in all this he had raised himself to that ideal of manhood which nature had implanted in An-ina's Indian heart. If she had thought of him as she would have

thought of him years ago in the teepees of her race, she would have been content that he was a great "brave" and a "mighty hunter." As it was her feelings were restricted to an immense pride that she had been permitted the inestimable privilege of raising a real white child to well-nigh perfect manhood.

Marcel knocked out the pipe he was smoking. It was with something like reluctance he withdrew his gaze from the far distance.

"I've only two days more, An-ina," he said. "The outfit's ready to the last ounce of tea and the filling of the last cartridge. The Sleepers are wide awake, and squatting around waiting for the word to 'mush.' We just daren't lose the snow for the run to our headquarters. I wish Uncle Steve would get around. I just can't quit till he comes."

"No."

The squaw's reply was one of complete agreement. She understood. The long summer trail was claiming the man. The hunter in him was clamouring for the silent forests, where King Moose reigned supreme, the racing mountain streams alive with trout and an untold wealth of salmon, the open stretches of plain where the caribou browsed upon the weedy, tufted Northern grass, the marsh land and lakes, where the beavers spend the open season preparing their winter quarters. Then the traps, and the wealth of fox pelts they would yield, while the eternal dazzle of the much-prized black fox was always before his eyes. But stronger than all was his thought for Steve. No passion, so far, was greater in his life than his regard for this man who had been father, mother, and mentor to him in the years of his helplessness.

An-ina pointed down the course of the winding river where it came out of the southern hills.

"He come that way," she said. Then she smiled. "The same he come always. The same he come long time gone, when Marcel hide by waters and make big shout. Him much scared. Marcel think? Oh, yes."

The man laughed in a happy boyish way.

"I'd like to, but I just can't," he said. Then he added: "You always think of that, An-ina. No," he went on with a shake of the head. "I remember riding Uncle Steve's back. Seems it was for days and days. I sort of remember sitting around and watching him while he looked down at a pair of feet like raw meat, with the flies all trying to settle on them. The sort of way flies have. Then there were his eyes. I've still got the picture of 'em in my mind. They were red—red with blood, it seemed. They were sort of straining, too. And they shone—shone like the blazing coals of a camp-fire."

An-ina nodded, and into her dark eyes came a look of the dread of the days he had recalled.

"That so," she said, in a tone of suppressed emotion. "It was bad—so bad. Him carry Marcel. Oh, yes. Carry all time, like the squaw carry pappoose. So you live,—and An-ina glad."

"Yes." The man bestirred himself abruptly. He stood up from his lounging against the gatepost, and his great height and breadth of muscular shoulders seemed suddenly to have grown. "So I live. And you are glad. That's it. So I live. It's always that way—with you and Uncle Steve. It's for me. All the time for me. Not a thing for yourselves—ever."

The woman's eyes were suddenly filled with startled questioning and solicitude.

"Oh, yes? That so," she said simply. "Why not? You all Uncle Steve got. You all An-ina got. So."

"And aren't you both all—I've got?" The man's smile disarmed the sudden passionate force which had

taken possession of his voice and manner. "Can't I act that way, too? Can't I sort of carry you and Uncle Steve on my back? Can't I come along and say, 'Here, you've done all this for me when I couldn't act for myself, now it's my turn? You sit around and look on, and act foolish, like I've done all the time, while I get busy.' Can't I say this, same as you've acted all these years? No. You two great creatures won't let me. And sometimes it makes me mad. And sometimes it makes me want to stretch out these fool arms of mine and hug you for the kindest, bravest, and best in the world."

An-ina laughed in her silent Indian fashion, and the delight in her eyes was a reflection of the joy in her soul.

"You say all those. It make no matter," she said.

"But it does make matter." The man's handsome face flushed, and his keen blue eyes shone with a half angry, half impatient light. With a curious gesture of suppressed feeling he passed a hand over his clean-shaven mouth, as though to smooth the whiskers that had never been permitted to disfigure it. "It makes me feel a darn selfish, useless hulk of a man. And I'm not," he cried. "I'm neither those things. Say An-ina," he went on, more calmly, and with a light of humour in his eyes, "Don't you dare to laff at me. Don't you dare deny the things I'm saying. I won't stand for it. For all you're my old nurse I'll just pick you up like nothing and throw you to the dogs back in the yard there. And maybe that'll let you see I can do the things I figure to. I'm a grown man, and Uncle Steve says 'no' every time I ask to take on the work of locating where the weed grows, which he hasn't found in fourteen years, and which my father was yearning to find before he died. 'No,' he says. 'This is for me. It's my work. It's the thing I set out to do—for you.' When I ask to do the trade at

Seal Bay, it's the same. He guesses the 'sharps' would beat me. Me! who could break a dozen of their heads in as many minutes. So I'm left to the trail—the summer trail—to gather pelts, and learn a craft I know by heart. I keep the Sleeper boys busy, and in good heart. I'm the big hunter they like to follow. I'm the son of a great white chief they say, and, for me, they're sort of fool dolls I pull the strings of, while Uncle Steve does the big man's work. Can you beat it? It's all wrong. You and Uncle Steve are twice my age. You've crowded a life's work—for me. You both reckon to go on—always for me. While I sit around guessing I'm a man because I know a jack-rabbit from a bull-moose. It's got to alter. It's going to alter—after the summer. I want the big scrap, An-ina. The real scrap life can hand a feller that can write 'man' to his name. I'm out for it all. I want it all. And if Uncle Steve's right, and I'm wrong, and I go under, I'm ready to take the med'cine however it comes."

The smile of the woman was full of the mother. It was full of the Indian, too.

"Oh, yes," she said quickly. "What you call him, 'chance.' The 'big chance.' So it is. It good. So very, very good for the big man. Marcel the big man. I know. Oh, yes. I know. The chance it come. Maybe easy. Maybe not. It come. So it is always. It come, you take it. You not must look, or you find trouble. You take it. Always take it when it come. That how An-ina think."

Marcel laughed. His impatience had vanished before the sun of his happy temperament.

"You've dodged the dogs, An-ina," he cried. "You're too cute for me. You've agreed with me, and haven't handed an inch of ground. But I tell you right here, you dear old second mother of mine, I'm going to play

the man as I see the game. And I'm going to play it good."

. . . . . .

The expression on the man's dusky face was deadly earnest. His lean brown hands were spread out over the fire for warmth. His fur-clad body was hunched upon his quarters, as near to the glowing embers as safety permitted. And as he talked a look of awe and apprehension dilated his usually unexpressive eyes.

"The fire run this way—that way," he cried, in a voice of monotonous cadence, but with a note of urgency behind it. "The man stand by dogs. He look—look all the time. Fire all same everywhere. It burn up all. Nothing left. Only two men. Boss Steve and Julyman. Oh, yes. They stan'. They look, too. They no fear. So they not burn all up. The man by the dogs much scare. He left him club, an' beat all dogs. So they all crazed with him club. They run. Oh, yes. An' the man turn. He run, too. Then Oolak see him face. Oh, yes. Him face of Oolak. Him eyes big with fear. Him cry out. So him run lak hell so the fire not get him."

The silent Oolak had committed himself to speech. He had talked long out of the superstitious dread that beset his Indian heart. He had dreamed a dream that filled him with fear of the future, towards which he looked for its fulfilment.

The grey dawn was searching the obscurity of the fringe of woody shelter in which the camp was made—the last camp on the return journey from Seal Bay to the fort. The smell of cooked meat rose from the pan which Julyman held over the fire. Steve sat on a fallen log, smoking, and listening tolerantly to the man's recital, while the sharp yapping of the dogs near by suggested

the usual altercation over their daily meal of frozen fish. The cold was intense, but the cracking, splitting booming which came up out of the heart of the woods told of the reluctant yielding of the tenacious grip of winter.

Something of Oolak's awe found reflection in the eyes of Julyman. He, too, was an easy prey to the other's primitive superstition. Steve alone seemed untroubled. He understood these men. They were comrades on the trail. There was no distinction. There was no master and servant here. They fought the battle together, the Indians only looking to him for leadership. Thus he restrained the lurking smile of irony as he listened to the awesome recital of a dream that filled the dreamer with serious apprehension.

"And this fire? Where did it come from?" he demanded, with a seriousness he by no means felt.

Oolak met his gaze with a look of appeal.

"The earth all fire," he said. "The hills, the valleys, the trees. All same. Him fire everywhere. Oh, yes. It run so as water. It fill 'em up all things—everywhere. An' it burn all up. Not boss Steve an' Julyman. Oh, no."

Steve meditated awhile. Oolak needed an interpretation of his dream, or, anyway, must listen to the voice of comfort. He understood this as he gazed upon the partially crippled body of the man who was still a giant on the trail.

The passing of years had touched Steve lightly enough. Time might almost have stood still altogether. A few grey hairs about the temples. A thinning of his dark hair perhaps. Then the lines of his face had perhaps deepened. But in the fourteen years that had elapsed since his return to Unaga the raw muscle and the powerful frame of his youthful body had only gained in mass and left him the more capable of withstanding the demands

which his life on the merciless plateau made upon his endurance.

Julyman, too, was much the Julyman of bygone years. The only change in him was that opportunity had robbed him of many of those lapses he had been wont to indulge in. But he was still no nearer the glory of a halo. Oolak alone displayed the wear and tear of the life that was theirs. His body was slightly askew from the disaster of the return from the first visit to Unaga, and one leg was shorter than the other. But the effect of these things was only in appearance. His vigour of body remained unimpaired. His silence was even more profound. And his mastery of the trail dogs left him a source of endless admiration to his companions.

Steve dipped some tea into a pannikin.

"Oolak had a nightmare, I guess," he said, feeling that a gentle ridicule could do no harm.

Julyman grinned his relief that the white man saw nothing serious in that which all Indians regard as the voice of the spirits haunting their world.

"Oolak eat plenty, much," he observed slyly.

Steve helped himself to meat from the pan and dipped some beans from the camp kettle beside the fire.

"Dreams are damn-fool things, anyway," he said. Then he laughed. "Guess we've dreamed dreams these fourteen years. And we're still sitting around waiting for things to happen."

Despite his concern Oolak tore at the meat with his sharp teeth, and ate with noisy satisfaction.

"Him all fire. Burn up all things. Oh, yes. Bimeby we find him," he said doggedly.

Steve was in the act of drinking. He paused, his pannikin remaining poised.

"You guess——"

"Him fire," said Oolak, wiping the grease from his

lips on the sleeve of his furs. "Him big fires. Oolak know. Him not eat plenty. Him see this thing. The spirits show him so he know all time."

Steve gulped his tea down, and set the pannikin on the ground.

"That's crazy," he declared. "It's not spirits who show Oolak. It's as Julyman says. He eats plenty. So he dreams fool things that don't mean a thing. Oolak doesn't need to believe the spirits are busy around him when he sleeps."

He laughed in the face of the unsmiling Oolak. But his laugh was cut short by the Indian's stolid response.

"Boss white man know all things plenty," he said, with the patient calm of a mind made up. "He big man. Oh, yes. Him bigger as all Indian man. Sure. But he not know the voice of the spirits that speak much with Indian man. Oolak know him. So. An' the father of Oolak. Oh, yes. So we find this fire sometime. We find him. This fire of the world. The spirits tell Oolak, so him not afraid nothing."

Julyman set a pannikin down with a clatter. He raised a brown hand pointing. He was pointing at Oolak, and his eyes were wide with inspiration.

"He dream of Unaga—him fire of Unaga! So!"

Steve started. In a moment, at the challenge of Julyman, his mind had bridged a gulf of fourteen years. He was gazing upon a scene he had almost forgotten. A strange, magnificent scene in the heart of a white world where snow and ice held nature's wonderful creation buried deep in its crystal dungeons. The distant, towering spire rising sheer above a surrounding of lofty mountains. The pillar of ruddy smoke and mist piercing deep into the heart of a cloud belt lit with the vivid reflection of blazing volcanic fires. The splendour of it had been awesome, terrific. He remembered it now.

All thought of ridicule had died within him. For the inspiration of Julyman had stirred his own inspiration beyond all reason. In a moment his mind was a surge of teeming thought, with Unaga—the fires of Unaga—the centre of a vivid, reckless imagination.

For fourteen years a wealth of dogged effort had been expended in an accumulation of failure, as he had admitted to Lorson Harris only a few weeks back in Seal Bay. The whole purpose of his life on Unaga had been denied him. Where he had sought and striven for Marcel, he had only partially made good. The promised fortune was amassing only slowly, painfully, while the child had grown to manhood with a rapidity that far outstripped it. The source of the elusive Adresol had remained hidden. Nature, and the Sleeper Indians, had refused him their secret.

For fourteen years the winter trail had been faced under the direst perils. And in all that time never once had the memory of the Spire of Unaga come to inspire him. He had pursued his endless search along the lines which the learning of the dead chemist had laid down. He had sought to trap the secret of the Sleeper men by every means in his power. But always and everywhere he had run upon the blank wall of failure.

Now—now, at a time when he had learned in Seal Bay disquieting news suggesting jeopardy for his whole enterprise, a flash of imagination had stirred in him an inspiration, which, against all reason, had changed the whole outlook of the future.

Unaga! Could it be? Was that the secret hiding-place of Nature? Could he make it? How far? Where? Somewhere within the boundaries of the Arctic ice? Maybe. He could not tell. The Spire was for all to see. Somewhere beyond. Somewhere lost in the grey world of the North. A lure to—what? A hundred miles.

Two. Three. Four. No, he could not estimate. He did not know. All he knew was that it was there, a fiery pillar, the simple sight of which set the heart of the Indian quaking. Was it there that the secret of the Adresol plant lay hidden? Was it there that the sturdy Sleepers dared the summer trail for their priceless treasure? What monstrous conditions had produced it? What amazing anachronism had Nature created in the far-off Arctic world?

And the terror of that journey in the dead of winter. It was a journey into the unknown, unguessed heart of a world's desolation. Was it possible? Was it within human powers of endurance? If the land of fire were the nursery whence the Sleepers drew their supplies of Adresol they made the journey. But it was in summer. Winter? Was it possible?

Yes. It was possible. It must be made possible. If it were not, if the effort were too great he could always pay the price. Marcel had grown to manhood. Fourteen years of failure had elapsed since the taking of his great decision. Here was a prospect. Here was a chance. Had he not in the past fourteen years taken every chance? Well, it was no time to shrink before the fiery heart of Unaga.

The men devoured their food. Steve had no desire to talk of his newborn inspiration. Bald words would never convince these primitive creatures. They looked to him for leadership. It was for him to dictate. It was for them to follow. To discuss the project he contemplated would weaken his authority.

So he smoked on in silence, with a tumult of thought passing behind the steady eyes gazing so deeply into the heart of the fire.

CHAPTER III

MANHOOD

AN-INA watched them pass out of the store together, her dark eyes following them until they vanished beyond the range of the doorway. Her regard for both was intense. The untamed Indian heart knew no reservations. She had no thought for anything in the world but these two men, and that which pertained to their well-being.

The depth of her devotion was unfathomable. Only its quality varied with each. For the one it was the devotion of the wife. For the other it was the devotion of the mother.

She made no comparison between them. How could she? Each in his way was perfect in her eyes. Young Marcel's superb manhood had no greater claim upon her woman's admiration than had the sturdy set of Steve's broad shoulders. The boy's sunny smile, and often humorous eyes, were no greater source of delight to her than the steady, honest purpose which was in every line of the older man's strong face. Age and temperament were far enough apart, but, to An-ina, they were children of a great mother heart.

At the lean-to store-house, built against the stockade wall, designed by the dead chemist to hold the bulk of Adresol he had hoped some day to discover and which had never yet been called upon to fulfil its original pur-

pose, Steve came to a halt. The melting snow lay heavy upon the sloping thatch of the roof, which was battened secure by heavy logs. It was banked against the door. It was laden upon the sills of the one long window. Steve kicked it clear of the door and took down the fastenings which secured it. He passed within, with Marcel close upon his heels.

"We're going to need it, boy—after all," Steve said, with a note in his voice and a light in his eyes that rarely found place in either. He laughed shortly. "Yes. I think so."

"You think so?"

There was a quick glance of responsive eagerness in Marcel's eyes. Well enough he knew the store had been built for one purpose only. He had long since dubbed it "The Poison House." Steve's words meant——

It had a long low interior, with a heavily raftered roof, and an earthen floor. It was a shadowed, empty tunnel that was only half lit, and gloomily seemed to merit the name Marcel had chosen for it. At the far end stood a small unused baling machine, and beside it a set of iron scales. And on the bench, set up under the windows, stood a few oddments of appliances of a scientific nature. For the rest it was pathetically empty. It was altogether a tragic expression of the failure of the living as well as the dead.

Steve laughed again. It was the same short laugh.

"Maybe I'm crazy," he said. "If I'm not, and there's two cents of luck waiting around on us, why, we'll need this old store-house after all. Yes, and I guess we'll need those poison masks your father made and figgered to need sometime. The whole thing leaves me guessing and wondering at the sort of fool man I am not to see what's been looking me in the face for the last fourteen years."

The flash of excitement leapt into Marcel's eyes.

"You've—found the stuff?" he demanded, in a curious hushed tone. Then with a rush: "Where? On the road to Seal Bay? Or the shores of Hudson's Bay? It's the sort of thing for a coast like that. Guess it's like seaweed. Where?"

Steve shook his head.

"Guess again," he said, with a smile of added confidence. "No, I haven't seen it. I haven't found it. It's just a notion in my fool head." His eyes lapsed again into their wonted seriousness. "It's a notion I've got, and—it's right. Oh, yes. In my mind's eye I can see the stuff growing. And—I—know—where. It's just for me to locate the place and make the journey——"

"For us, Uncle Steve."

Steve turned sharply and gazed up into the boy's handsome, determined face. He studied the unsmiling blue eyes that returned his look unflinchingly. And that which he read in them left him with a realization that a new chapter in the history of their companionship was about to open.

"We'll get along to your father's office, boy," he said quietly. "It's been our refuge and schoolroom for fourteen years. Maybe it's still the best place for us both to learn our lessons."

He led the way out without waiting for reply. And as they passed from the portals of the Poison House he again set up the fastenings.

Each had his own place in the simple room which Marcel's father had dedicated to the science which had been his whole life. For him it had been all sufficient. The storming of the elements outside might have been the breathlessness of a tropical climate so far as he cared, once absorbed in the studies that claimed him. And in a measure the atmosphere of the room had a similar influence upon these two who came after him.

Steve occupied the chair at the desk. Marcel had taken possession of the chair which stood before a small table upon which he had been accustomed to pursue the simple studies Steve had been able to prepare for him. He had turned the chair about so that he sat with his feet upon the rail of the stove in which summer and winter the fire was never permitted to go out. He had come prepared to listen to the man who had always been his guide and well-loved friend. But he had come also with the intention of pressing those claims of manhood which were passionately crying out within him.

The room was changed only that the belongings of these men, accumulated in fourteen years, predominated over those things which the dead man had left behind him. The room was intimate with the personalities of its new tenants, while it still retained full evidence of the man who had modelled its original character.

For some moments Steve searched amongst the drawers of the desk. Finally he produced a number of note books and well-worn diaries. These he set on the writing pad before him. Then he smilingly regarded the man who was as a son to him.

"Guess I've got the things I need, boy," he said. "They're support for the notion I'm going to tell you about. That's so you won't think I'm crazy," he added, laying a hand on the books.

Marcel nodded keenly.

"Sure. And the notion?"

Steve understood the other's impatience.

"Ordinarily I'd hand you what's got into my mind right away," he said, still regarding the books. "But that way I couldn't convince anything. There's got to be arguments, and your father's got to hand us the argument."

He thrust his fur cap back from his forehead.

"Light a pipe, boy," he went on kindly. "I've got to make a big talk. And, for a while, anyway, you've got to listen."

Marcel laughed. He obeyed without demur. But Steve was in no way blinded to the fact that for all his excited interest there was lying, at the back of everything, a tug-of-war coming between them, a tug-of-war which he was by no means sure he was equal to.

"I'm just glad about the big talk," Marcel said. "You see, Uncle Steve, there isn't much of the kid left in me. This country doesn't leave us kids long. I'm still ready to act when you say so, and mostly without question. But a whole heap of questions have been buzzing around in my head lately, and they need to get out sometime. May as well be now. Talk all you need, an' I'll blow the pipe."

Steve nodded. He knew the rope for the tug was laid.

"I'll begin at the right start," he said. "That way I'll have to hand you things you already know. But I don't want to leave you guessing anywhere along the line, because you're going to tell me all you think when I've done. First we'll look right back. For fourteen years we've chased over this territory where your father chased before us. We've followed his notions to the letter set out in these old books. We've gone further. We've tried tracking the Sleepers in the open season, which he reckoned was a bad play. The result? Nix. We've done all he's done and more, and we've no better result than he had. We've read and re-read his stuff. We've dreamed, and wondered, and guessed till we know the whole of Unaga like the pages of one of his books. We've failed to find the growing ground of this darn Adresol, and, like your father, we've had to content ourselves with a trade in the dried stuff these dopey rascals choose to hand us. In twice the years he had at his dis-

posal we haven't advanced a step along the path he's handed to us."

He turned the pages of some of the notebooks while the smoke of Marcel's pipe distributed a pleasant haze about the room.

"Now your father was a heap more than a clever scientific man," he went on a moment later, "and I get that through his notes, which I well-nigh know by heart. He was a reasoner in those things that had nothing to do with his science. Guess he was dead practical, too, well-nigh a genius that way. As for his courage and patience —well, I guess you've only got to look around you at this old fort. You won't need my hot air to tell you of it. So I'm left guessing at the wonder of it. *He just missed the whole point of his own observations, and knowledge, and research.*"

A smile crept into Steve's eyes as he made the final announcement. It grew into his characteristic short laugh.

"Oh, I'm not going to tell you how wise I am. I'm not going to tell you your great old father was a fool man, and I'm the wise guy that's figgered out all he missed. I'm the fool man who's been handed a fool's luck. I was sitting around over the camp-fire on the trail from Seal Bay with nothing better to do than to listen to the crazy dream of an ignorant, superstitious neche. It was in that fool yarn I found the answer to all the questions we've asked in fourteen years. As I tell you, it was just a crazy notion till I started in to fit it to the arguments your father handed to us. Then I saw in a flash, and got the start of my life. There's times that I'm still wondering if I'm not plumb crazed."

He indicated a notebook which he had opened. Its pages were scored with his own pencilled notes.

"I don't need to worry you with all the stuff written

here," he went on. "You know it like I do. But I'm going to read a piece so you'll get the full drift of my argument when I hand it you. First, though, we'll reconstruct some. The neches go out for this stuff in the open season. They start when the ice breaks, and don't get back to home till things freeze up again. That's important. They bring the Adresol in *dried*. Like stuff dead for months. They don't bring it green, and dry it themselves. They bring it *dried*. Now then, your father says that one root would yield a thousand per cent. more Adresol than the green foliage. And the green foliage five hundred per cent. more than the dried. Why then do the neches bring in the dried stuff in the open growing season? Do they prefer it that way?" He shook his head thoughtfully. "Guess it's not that. There's a reason though. These folk have been using this stuff for ages. Yet they never bring it green. They never bring the root. Why not? Do they know about the yield of the foliage, of the root? Maybe. But I don't think so. I'd like to say *they've never seen the stuff in its growing state*. Only dead!"

Steve picked up the notebook in front of him.

"I want to read this to you, boy. You've read it. We've both read it, but it's got a different meaning—now. Listen."

"'Adresol has many features, interesting and deadly, foreign to all other known drug-producing flora. Aconite, digitalis, and the commoner varieties of toxins lie dormant in the producing plant. That is, there are no exhalations of a noxious nature. In Adresol the drug is active—violently active. Adresol extracted and duly treated (see note X, Book C) for uses in medicine is not only harmless to the human body in critical stages of disease, but even beneficial to the whole system in a manner not yet fully explored. But in its active, crude

state in the growing plant, it is of a very violent and deadly character. It would almost seem that an All-wise Creator has, for this reason, set it to flourish in climates almost unendurable to human and animal life, and in remotenesses almost inaccessible. No animal or human life could exist within the range of the poison its deadly bloom exhales. The plant belongs to the order Liliaceæ and would seem from its general form to be closely allied with the Lilium Candidum. This, however, only applies to its form, and by no means to its habit. Its magnificent bloom is dead white and of intense purity. A field of this strange plant in full bloom, viewed from above, would probably give an appearance like the spread of a white damask table-cloth of giant proportions. The blooms almost entirely obscure the weed-like foliage. The danger lies in the pungent, sickly, but delicious perfume it exhales, which is so intense, that, coming up against the wind, it could be detected miles away. Before and after its blooming season it is only less deadly that it can be safely approached. To cut or break the sappy stems and foliage would be only to court prompt disaster without the use of adequate poison masks. The newly cut plant exhales the same deadly perfume as the bloom, one deep breath of which would frequently be fatal to human life. The cuts in the foliage heal up quickly, however, and after a day's delay its transport could be safely undertaken. The reference here is to transport in the open air. The green harvest once stored in a confined space again becomes actively dangerous. All stores containing it should be carefully locked up, and isolated, and should only be entered by those with poison masks carefully adjusted. The only moment at which Adresol, in its native conditions, is perfectly innocuous is in its dead season, when the bulbous root lies dormant. The pro-

portion of the drug contained in the dried foliage, however, is infinitely small.'"

Steve looked up from his reading.

"That," he said, "is all we need to convince us of the Sleepers' lack of understanding of the nature of the plant. I'd say right here they've never seen the plant in growth. If they had they'd be scared to get next it by a thousand miles. Whatever we don't know of Adresol, we do surely know Indians. But I guess there's a heap more importance in that writing than that. How do these folk get the dead stuff in the growing season—the blooming season? How can they face that deadly scent? They've no scientific poison masks. Yet year after year an outfit makes the summer trail and they get back when things freeze up with enough Adresol for their own doping, and a big bunch for trade to us. Your father doesn't answer that. He leaves us guessing, and thinking of winter when the whole darn country is covered feet thick in snow and ice."

The interest in Marcel's eyes was profound, and he drew a deep breath as Steve paused. He had no question, however. He sat leaning forward in his chair expectantly, waiting, his pipe dead out and forgotten.

Steve's face suddenly lit with a smile.

"Now I'm going to give you a crazy man's answer to all those things. I'd hate for your father to hear me. I'm going to say the growing, blooming season of this queer stuff *is dead, hard winter.* At least up here. I'm going to say the foliage lies dead the whole of the open season, and the root is dormant. I'm going to say these Sleepers don't know a thing but the stuff they find, and never have known in all their history. I believe that some where away back their ancestors found the dead weed, and maybe used it to smoke like other weeds some of the Northern Indians use. Maybe it doped them in the pipe.

Maybe some bright squaw tried boiling it into a drink. It's a guess. You can't say how they came to use it as dope. Anyway the thing just developed, and has gone on without them getting wise to any of the things your father knew."

"Oh, yes, it all sounds crazy," Steve hurried on as Marcel stirred. "It's too crazy I guess for a scientific head like your father's. But he hadn't listened to Oolak's fool dream, and he never saw the thing I've seen—twice."

"You've seen?"

Marcel could deny himself no longer. Intense excitement urged him. Steve shook his head.

"I haven't found it—yet," he said. "No. The thing I've seen you've seen, too. You were just a bit of a kiddie and won't remember. I'll try and fix up the picture of what I saw then in the far-away distance, and what I see now in my crazy mind's eye."

He paused. Then, with a swift movement that had something of excitement in it, he flung out an arm pointing while his voice took on a new note, and his words came rapidly.

"Somewhere out there," he cried. "A land of glacial ice, endless snow and ice. Hills everywhere, broken, bald, immense. A range of mountains. In the midst of 'em a giant hill bigger and higher than anything I've ever dreamed. A hill of blasting, endless fire. It never dies out. It burns right along, belching the fiery heart out of the bowels of the earth. And everywhere about, for maybe miles, a blistering tropical heat that defies the deadliest cold the Arctic hands out. Do you get it? Sure you do. You're getting my crazy notion, that isn't so crazy. Well, what then? Winter. A temperature that turns a snowstorm into a pleasant summer rain, and the blizzard into a summer gale. Vegetation starts

into growth. I can't guess how the absence of sun fixes it. Maybe it grows—*white*. But it grows—grows all the time, like those things of the folk who grow out of season. Then spring, and the sun again. Rising temperature. The heat from this hell ripens the stuff quick, and the sun makes it green again. This Adresol. A great field of dead white. Then, as swiftly, it dies. Dies before the Indians come. Burnt up by the rising temperature of the advancing season *and the blistering volcanic heat.*"

Marcel started up from his chair with an excited cry.

"You're right, Uncle," he cried, completely carried away. "But where? Where's this place? This old hill? I've seen it? Where?"

"It's north, boy. Away north. God knows how far."

Steve's voice had lost something of its note of inspiration before the hard facts which Marcel's question had brought home to him. He paused for a moment with his eyes hidden. Then, with a curious movement which suggested the determined squaring of his shoulders, he broke out again.

"Yes. It's miles—maybe hundreds of miles away north. It's somewhere in the heart of Unaga. Some place explorers never hit. It's the great Spire of Unaga. The unquenchable Fires of Unaga. It's a living volcano that sets all other volcanoes looking like two cents. I've seen it twice—in the far-off distance. You've seen it once. The boys have seen it, too. It looked like a pillar propping up the roof of the heavens. A pillar of fire. It set me nigh crazy with wonder. And it scared the boys to death. They guessed it was the breeding ground of all evil spirits. But it's there, and it grows our stuff. And I'm going right out after it."

"Yes!"

Marcel dropped back into his chair. His exclamation

was a vent to the emotions which the force of Steve's words had stirred.

"Yes. Sure," he added a moment later. "We'll go right out after it."

"We?"

Steve looked up with a start.

The boy's excitement had passed. He regarded his foster-father with a pair of challenging, smiling eyes that were full of humour. But the challenge was definite. He re-lit his pipe.

"Why, yes, Uncle," he said promptly. "We'll go. That's how you said. I'm all in on this. I'm crazy to see all that wonderland can show me. It doesn't scare me a thing. You see, it's a winter trail. I guess I know the summer trail so I won't forget it. The winter trail's new and I'm crazy for it. You'll need us all on this thing. I——"

Steve shook his head. Marcel broke off at the sign, and the smile passed out of his searching eyes as he sought to read what lay behind that silent negative.

"You mean—?" he went on, a moment later, a flush mounting to his cheeks and suggesting a sudden stirring of passionate protest.

"I don't mean a thing but that you can come right along if you think that way."

The smile that accompanied Steve's words was gently disarming. There was no equivocation. It was impossible for the boy to misread what he said. The capitulation had not waited for the passionate challenge Marcel had been prepared to make.

"You—mean that, Uncle?"

"Surely. If you're yearning to take a hand, boy, I don't figger to get in your way." Steve closed up the books on his desk and dropped them back in the drawer from which he had taken them. Then he thrust back his

chair and prepared to join the other in a smoke. "I've got just two feelings on this thing, Marcel," he went on, as he filled his pipe. "I'm glad you feel that way, but I'm kind of sorry to think you're going along with me. You see, I kind of think of you as my son. I've done all I know in fourteen years to teach you my notion of what a man needs to be. I've done the best I know that way. And I'd have hated to find you short of the grit I reckon this enterprise is going to need." He laughed. "If you'd have turned out a sort of 'Squaw-man' I guess I'd have hated you like a nigger. But there wasn't a chance of it, with a father and mother like you had. No." He lit his pipe, and settled himself in his chair. "The way you've learned to beat the summer trail, your woodcraft. You're a 'great hunter and brave,' as An-ina says, and you've got every Indian I've ever known left cold behind you. You've grown to all I've hoped, and I'm glad. And now—now this great last enterprise is coming along, why, it just leaves me proud thinking that you couldn't listen to the yarn of it, even, without reckoning to be on the outfit yourself. I'm glad—just glad."

Marcel's eyes shone. Steve's approval, unqualified, was something he had not hoped for. He had been prepared to battle for his rights as a man, and now—now the wonder of it. He was admitted to the task confronting them without question; with only cordial agreement. He remembered with regret his outburst to An-ina, when he had been waiting for Steve's return from Seal Bay.

"You see," he burst out with impulsive frankness, "I was scared you'd hold me to the fort, Uncle, the same as it's been every winter. I was just getting mad thinking I was only fit for the open summer trail, chasing up pelts with a bunch of these doper neches. Oh, yes. It set me mad. And I told An-ina. I'm not a kid, Uncle.

Guess I'm all the man I'll ever be, and I just want to get busy on a man's work. I can't stand for seeing you doing these things for me. You don't get younger. And I—I'm bursting with health and muscle, and my spirit's just crying out against being nursed like a kid. I came here to kick, Uncle, I did—sure. To kick hard—if you'd refused me. But I needn't have thought that way—with you. And I'm sore now that I did. By Gee! It's just great! That hill, those fires! We'll start to fix the whole thing. And we'll get right out in the fall."

"Sure." Steve nodded. His eyes were very tender, and their smile was the smile he always held for the boy who had now become a man. "It'll be fall—early fall. We can't start out too early, but it mustn't be till the dopers are asleep. You see, we've got to leave An-ina behind—without a soul to protect her."

"Yes." Marcel's happy eyes shadowed. But they brightened at once. "Couldn't we leave Julyman? There'd still be the three of us."

"I s'pose we could."

Steve seemed to consider for a moment, his serious eyes turned on the stove. Marcel watched him anxiously. Presently the elder man looked up. To the other it seemed that all doubt had passed out of his mind.

"I'd best tell you what's in my mind," he said. "I got it from Leclerc at Seal Bay. I got it, by inference, from my talks with Lorson Harris. The Seal Bay Co. are out after us all they know. They're out after our stuff. Our secret. They've opened up Fort Duggan, and sent a crook called David Nicol there to run it. And he's out to jump our claim. It comes to this. This outfit is on the prowl. Their job is to locate us. Well? An-ina alone! Even Julyman with her! What then if this bunch hits up against the fort while we're away?

Oh, I'm not thinking of our 'claim.' It's An-ina. The soul who's handed over her life to us. The woman who's nursed you ever since you were born. And who'd give up her life any hour of the day or night if she guessed it would help you. Can we leave her to Julyman? You best tell me how you think—just how you think."

The expressive face of Marcel reflected the emotion which Steve's words had set stirring in his boyish heart. The delight at his contemplated share in the great adventure had been shining in his eyes. Now they were shadowed with anxiety at the talk of Lorson Harris and his scouts. A moment's disappointment followed. But this was swept away by a rush of feeling at the thought of his second mother left alone and unprotected, except by an Indian.

In a moment all that was loyal and generous in him swamped the selfishness of his own youthful desire. His passionate rebellion at being shut out from all he considered as man's work was completely forgotten. He remembered only the gentle dusky creature who needed his man's support.

"You needn't say a thing, Uncle Steve," the youngster cried. "I was crazy to go. I'm that way still. But—well, I just can't stand for An-ina being left. She's more than my second mother. She's the only mother I remember."

Steve nodded.

"I guessed you'd feel that way boy, and—I'm glad.'

CHAPTER IV

KEEKO

BEYOND the river, the trees came down to the water's edge, where roots lay bare to the lap of the stream which frothed about them. They shadowed the wide waters with a reflection of their own dark mystery. They helped to close in the world about old Fort Duggan, deepening the gloom of its aged walls, and serving to aggravate the shadow of superstition with which the native mind surrounded it.

The hills rose up in every direction. They were clothed with forests whose silence only yielded to crude sounds possessing no visible source. The river seemed to drive its way through invisible passes. It appeared out of a barrier of woodlands, backed by a rampart of seemingly impassable hills, and vanished again in a similar opposite direction. Between these points it lay there, a broad, sluggish stretch of water upon which the old fort looked down from the rising foreshore.

The benighted instincts of the Shaunekuks know no half measure. Fort Duggan to them was the gateway of Unaga, which was the home of all Evil Spirits. So they looked upon the fort without favour, and left it severely alone.

But now all that was changed. Fort Duggan was no longer silent, still, the shadowed abode of evil spirits. Crazy white folks had come and taken possession of it.

They had dared the wrath of the Evil One, and the old place rang with the echo of many voices.

For awhile these primitive folk had looked on in silence. They wondered. They thought of the Evil One and waited for the blow to fall. But as the weeks and months went by without the looked-for retribution they began to take heart and give rein to a curiosity they could no longer resist. Who were these folk? Why had they come? But most important of all, what had they brought with them?

They found a white man and two white women. They found several dusky creatures like themselves, only of different build. Oh, yes, they were Indians, Northern Indians, but they were foreigners. They were slim, tough creatures who gazed in silent contempt upon the undersized people who came to observe them.

But the Shaunekuks were not concerned deeply with the men of their own colour. It was the white man and the white women who chiefly aroused their curiosity. Years of tradition warned them that the coming of the white man was by no means necessarily an unmixed blessing, and so they had doubts, very grave doubts.

Perhaps the white man understood. Anyway he promptly took steps. He invited them to feast their eyes upon the treasures he had brought with him from far distant lands. He assured them that he had come to give away all these splendid things in exchange for the furs, which only great hunters like the Shaunekuks knew how to obtain.

Capitulation was instant. The Indians forthwith held a council of their wise men, and set about inundating the fort with priceless furs. So it had gone on ever since. In a year the white man was complete master of the situation. In less than two years he had assumed the office of dictator.

The man Nicol knew his work. He had been sent there by Lorson Harris, which was sufficient guarantee. None knew it better. Having established in the Indian mind the necessity for his existence amongst them, he exploited the position to its extreme limits. Through methods which knew no scruple he usurped the authority of the wise men, or adapted it to his own uses. He saw to it that the generosity of his original trading was swiftly reduced to the bare bone of extortion. And the Indians submitted. The white man had come in the midst of their darkness and had given them light, at least he had dazzled their eyes, and excited their cupidity by his display of trade. Furs—furs. They could always obtain furs. If he were foolish enough to exchange simple furs for beautiful beads, and blankets, and tobacco, and essences, and coloured prints, and even fire-water, well, that was his lookout. At least they were not the fools.

With the coming of the white man and the two white women with their several Indian followers the life of the Shaunekuks at Fort Duggan was completely revolutionized. Before the foolish Indians knew what was happening they were captured body and soul. They quickly learned that the white man was to be feared rather than loved. They realized it was better to risk the anger of the Evil Spirits of Unaga rather than to offend him. So they yielded to the course which they hoped would afford them the greatest benefit. It was no less than submitting to an unacknowledged slavery.

It was perhaps a dangerous condition, a situation full of risk for the white man and all his people, should his force and ruthlessness weaken even for one moment. But Nicol was too widely experienced, too naturally cut out for his work to fall for weakness. He treated the Indian as he would treat a trail dog, as a savage beast to

be beaten down to the master will, and kept alive only as long as it yielded return for the clemency.

For the women folk of this man the benighted Indians had little concern. One of them was sick, which made her a creature of even less consequence. The other, the one who called herself Keeko, she seemed to live her own life regardless of the man, regardless of everybody except the sick woman, who was her mother. She made the summer trail after pelts and so trespassed upon what the Indians regarded as their rights, but since the white man seemed to approve there was little to be said.

Just now the spring freshet had subsided, which meant that the river was clear of ice. Keeko was at the landing preparing for the trail. She was there with her Indians looking on while the laden canoes received their final lashings, and the joy of the open season was surging in her rich young veins.

Keeko was more than a little tall. She was as graceful as a young fawn in her suit of beaded buckskin. She was as slim as a well-grown boy in her mannish suit, with muscles of steel under flesh of velvet softness. Reliance and purpose, and the joy of living, looked out of her beautiful, deeply fringed eyes. Her ripe lips and firm chin were as full of decision as the oval of her wholesomely tanned cheeks was full of girlish beauty.

An Indian looked up quickly at the sound of her keen tone of authority. His face was crumpled and scored with advancing years, and the merciless blast of the northern winter trail. But for all his years he was hard as nails.

"We'll pull out after we've eaten," cried the girl. "We're days late. Get Snake Foot, and don't leave the outfit unguarded. Guess we're not yearning for the scalliwag Shaunekuks thieving around. It'll be two hours. The sun'll be shining there," she pointed, indi-

cating an immense bank of forest trees. "Where's Med'cine Charlie? By the teepees of the Shaunekuks? He's most generally that way."

Little One Man nodded, and grinned in his crumpled way.

"Oh, yes," he said. "But I get 'em."

"Good. See to it." The girl nodded. "Don't forget. Two hours. The sun on the water. I come."

Keeko turned away up the rising foreshore in the direction of the long, low building of the fort.

Once she was beyond the observation of the Indian's keen eyes her whole expression underwent a change. The light died out of her eyes and a deep anxiety replaced it. She was torn by conflicting feelings. The desire of the trail had grown to a passion. The immense solitudes of the great forests were the paradise she dreamed of during the long dark days of winter. But deep in her heart there were other feelings that preoccupied her no less.

Her mother was sick, sick to death with the ravages of consumption, on a bed from which she would only be removed for a grave somewhere in the shadows of the surrounding woods. And she loved her mother. She loved her mother with a passionate devotion.

It was the thought of all that might happen during her prolonged absence that robbed Keeko's eyes of their buoyant light and happy smile. But—what could she do? She must go. She knew she must go. It had all been arranged between her and her mother. And with each season her work became more urgent.

As she passed up to the fort her mind had leapt back to the early days when she had reached full young womanhood. And a scene that lived in her memory came back again to urge her, as it never failed to urge her at such moments.

It was one of the many times that her mother had hovered at the brink of the grave. She and her stepfather had shared the watch at the sick-bed. Up till that time the man had displayed no regard for herself but the treatment he would bestow upon an unwelcome burden on his life. There had been a bitter antagonism on his part, an antagonism that suggested positive hatred. But while they sat watching the closed, sunken eyes and waxen features of her mother, as she lay gasping in what seemed to be the last throes before collapse, an amazing change seemed to take place in him. His whole attitude towards herself appeared to alter. It became impressive in its kindliness and solicitude. He seemed suddenly to have become far more tenderly thoughtful for her welfare than for the wife who lay dying before his eyes. And when he spoke— But his words and tones did more than disturb her. It was at the sound of them that the almost dead eyes of her mother opened wide and turned a dreadful stare upon him. For minutes it seemed they stared while the ashen lips remained silent, unmoving. It was painful, dreadful. It was the man, who, at last, broke the horror of it all. He rose abruptly, silently from his chair and passed out of the room.

Then had come the great change. The moment the man had passed beyond the door her mother stirred. She seemed to become feverishly alive in a manner suggesting the victory of sheer will over a half dead body. She turned on her bed, and a warm light flooded her eyes.

"Don't *you* go, child," she had gasped eagerly. "I'm not dead yet and I don't intend to die. I'm going to live long enough to fool him. Say, you've got to quit nursing me. I tell you I shan't die—yet. A squaw can do all I need. You reckon to help me. I know. You're a good girl. You're too good to be— If you reckon to help me there's just one way. Get out. Get right out. Learn

to help yourself. Get out into the open. It's only the woods, and the trail, and the Northern world'll teach you the same as they taught your father. You've got to get so you can face life—when the time comes around—alone. Learn to handle a gun—and use it. Learn to face men, and hold them in the place that belongs them, whether they're Indians or white. I'll die later on. But I won't die till I'm ready. And that'll only be when I see you fit to stand alone. Then I'll be glad, and I'll die easy."

The natural protest had promptly risen to the girl's lips.

"But I'll have Father," she cried. "Please, please let me help you, Mother dear. I want to make you happy, and comfortable, and better. I don't want you to die, and——"

But her plea was never completed. A hard, cold light suddenly leapt into the sick woman's haggard eyes.

"Don't mention your father to me," she cried fiercely. "He's no father of yours. Cut the thought of his help right out of your mind. Forget it, and work—work as I say. Work and learn, so you don't need to fear man or—devil."

It was more than three years ago since the scene occurred. Her mother had said she would live. She had lived, and was still dragging on a now completely bedridden life. She lived, and, to the girl, it sometimes seemed that it was only the fierce purpose in her mind that kept her alive.

From that time, despite all other inclination, Keeko had obeyed. She had plunged herself into the battle of the Northland which only the hardiest could hope to survive. Even the winter trail she had dared and—conquered. Oh, yes. She had obeyed and she had realized her mother's commands to the letter. She had

reached that point now when she feared neither man nor—devil.

But for all her ability the whole of Keeko's equipment was only a splendid veneer. Under it all she remained the simple-hearted girl, the loyally devoted daughter. Her mother was still her first concern, a concern that haunted her in the far distant woods, and on the waters of the river, in storm and sunshine alike, and amidst the snows of the winter trail. Each time she returned to her home she feared to find her mother gone, flown to that rest from which there was no returning. And, as the seasons passed her fears only increased. Her mother fought with a passion of bitter purpose, but she was struggling against an irresistible foe.

It was this that troubled Keeko now. It was the thought of nearly six months' absence, and that which she might return to, that robbed her eyes of their smiling light. She must go, she knew. It was her mother's will. But she was loth, bitterly loth.

She passed within the low doorway of the fort, and approached her mother's room. The place was all very crude. Its atmosphere lacked all sense of comfort. It was all makeshift, and the stern days of the old buccaneers frowned out of every shadowed corner. Keeko had neither time nor inclination to brighten the place to which her step-father's plans had brought them. And her mother—? Her mother was indifferent to all but the purpose which seemed to keep her hovering upon the brink of the grave.

When Keeko entered the sick room the attendant squaw gladly enough departed to the sunlight outside. And, left alone, the girl prepared to take her customary farewell. The eyes of the sick woman lit at the sight which was her only remaining joy in life. But the tone of her voice retained its privileged quality of complaint.

"You're pulling out?" she demanded, in a low, husky voice, in which there was always a gasp. "I was hoping you'd be around earlier, seeing you won't get back till fall."

The girl understood. She did not take up the challenge.

"I had to fix the outfit right, Mother," she said. "You can't even rely on Little One Man. But I guess it's all fixed now. How are you feeling? Better? You're looking——"

"You don't need to ask fool questions. You don't need to worry how I look. It's you we need to think for. How many boys are you taking?"

"Three. Little One Man, Snake Foot, and Med'cine Charlie. They're all I need. Snake Foot and Charlie with the big canoe and outfit, and Little One Man and me with the other. We're out after a big bunch of pelts."

The sick woman's eyes shone prompt approval, for all the fixity of their regard.

"See and get them. You've put your cash away. You've hidden it close. I mean the cash for your trade at Seal Bay. That way you'll be fixed all right. Keep it close, child. This year you need a good haul. Yes, yes. And trade it, and hide the cash. Always hide your money. How much have you got?"

"Nearly two thousand dollars."

"Not enough. Not enough. You need more. See you get it this year."

The mother broke off in a spasm of coughing, and Keeko stood helpless and fearing until the fit had passed.

The tragedy of it all was terrible to the girl who had to look on so utterly helpless. The convulsed figure beneath the coloured blankets was simply skin and bone. The alabaster of the sunken cheeks was untouched by any

hectic display. The ravages of the consumption were too far advanced for that. The wreck was terrible, and the dreadful cough seemed to be tearing the last remaining life out of the poor soul's body.

"Well, don't stand around, child," the sick woman gasped, after a prolonged struggle for breath. "You're going to eat. I can smell the cooking. Well, go and eat. It's good to be able to. You've got to get another three thousand dollars. You can get them out of your furs—if you've any luck. Maybe this year. Don't worry for me. I'll die when I feel like it, but not before. God bless you, child—as you deserve. You needn't come around again before you pull out. It's time wasted, and you've none to spare. Good-bye. You can send Lu-cana in to me again when you go."

The straining eyes closed as though to shut out sight of the going of the child who was all that was left to the remnant of a mother heart. And Keeko knew that the dismissal must be accepted. There could be no tender farewell. Her mother forbade it. Yet the girl was longing to nurse and caress the suffering creature in her arms. But she understood. Her mother refused everything for herself in a burning fever of urgency. There was time for nothing—nothing but that purpose which she had set her heart on.

Keeko obeyed. She passed out of the room at once.

Her meal was awaiting her, a rough, plain meal prepared by the squaw of Little One Man. She partook of it in the kitchen, the long, dark old hallplace that had probably served as some sort of barracks for the disreputable pirates of centuries ago. She ate with a healthy appetite, and some half hour later quit the shadows of the gloomy fort for the bright sunlight of a spring noon.

The hour of her departure was nearing, and Keeko

glanced down at the landing. Her canoes lay there at their moorings, but——

Her orders had been disobeyed! The canoes were deserted. Little One Man was nowhere to be seen. Neither were the other boys. A quick frown of displeasure darkened her pretty face, and she moved down to the water's edge almost at a run.

But her journey was interrupted. It was the sound of a familiar, angry voice, harsh, furious. It came from behind her, somewhere behind the fort. The words were indistinguishable in their violence, but, as she listened, there came another sound with which she was all too familiar. It was the sickening flog of a rawhide quirt on a human body. It was her step-father flogging an Indian, with all the brutality of his ungovernable temper.

Keeko's eyes flashed in the direction of the canoes. Inspiration leapt. Where were *her* boys? They had no concern with the work of the fort. They were *hers*. Something of the teachings and instincts of the life she had learned stirred her to action. Light as a deer she ran to the landing, and snatched up a rifle lying in one of the boats. It was the instinct of self-preservation. But it was also an expression of her determination to enforce her rights—if need be.

There was no hesitation. Keeko had learned so much in the past three years. She knew the man who was her step-father. She knew his brutality to Indians, and she suspected more. She hated the thought in her mind now. She even feared it. But she was determined.

She was late by the seconds it had taken her to reach the spot. It was a spot she knew well enough. A single tree standing by itself just behind the fort. She found a group of Indians gathered about it looking on in apparent indifference. Above their heads,

in their midst, she beheld the rise and fall of a heavy quirt.

Into the midst of this gathering she thrust her way. And, in a moment, her worst suspicions were realized. Her boy, Snake Foot, was bound to the tree-trunk. Bared to the waist, cowering but silent, he was shrinking under the cruel blows of the quirt. Nicol, his dark eyes blazing with a merciless fury, was flinging every ounce of his strength into each blow of the terrible weapon in his hand. Keeko's horrified eyes missed nothing. She saw that Little One Man and Med'cine Charlie were amongst the crowd. It was all she needed.

In a moment she had flung herself in front of her Indian's bleeding body, and whether by design or chance the muzzle of her rifle was pointing and covering her step-father.

Her eyes were on his inflamed face. They were confronting him without a sign of fear or any other emotion.

"Don't let that quirt fall on me!" she cried. "I want Snake Foot right now, and I'm going to have him. Little One Man," she went on, without removing her eyes from the furious face of the man still flourishing his quirt aloft, "just cut him adrift right away, and hustle down to the landing. We're going to pull out—sharp."

But Nicol had recovered from his surprise, and his mad fury suddenly leapt into full flood again.

"Stand aside, girl!" he roared violently. "This swine refused to obey my orders and I'm going to teach him—and anyone else—who's master here. Get out of my way," he bellowed with an ominous threat of the quirt.

Keeko stood her ground. Her two boys had closed in towards her. They were on either side of her, and a wicked gleam lit the eyes of Little One Man as he watched the man with his upraised weapon. Keeko knew her step-father had been drinking. The signs were

plain enough to her. They were all too familiar. But there was no yielding in her, whatever the consequences of her act.

"Cut him adrift," she cried sharply, to the men beside her. Then to Nicol her tone was only a shade less commanding. "Let that quirt touch me, and I won't answer for the consequences. Guess you've no right to thrash my boy, and I'm right here to see you quit. Think it over," she added, and, with her last word, there was a movement of her rifle which added to its aggression.

Just for a moment it looked as though a clash was inevitable. Just for a moment it seemed as if the man's half-drunken madness was about to drive him to extremes. But the girl's cool nerve, or more probably, perhaps, the presence of her rifle, seemed to have a sobering effect. There was the snick of Little One Man's razor-like knife as he released his bound comrade from the flogging post, then Nicol, with a filthy oath, flung his quirt on the ground, and, turning, thrust his way through the crowd, and strode back to the fort.

Five minutes later Keeko was down at the landing. She was standing looking on while her Indians cast off the moorings of the canoes. She was shaking from head to foot. But not a sign of her weakness was permitted in the sharp, clear orders she flung at her crew.

CHAPTER V

A DUEL

"WHAT'S amiss with Keeko?"

The sick woman opened a pair of startled eyes. She half turned her face towards the darkened doorway.

Nicol was standing there. He had entered the room at that moment, but with a quiet unusual to him. She gazed at him without reply. Perhaps the activity of her brain was dulling. Perhaps she was searching the face, the sight of which she had learned in years to hate and fear.

It was a handsome face still, for all the man was approaching fifty. It was fleshy, and its dark beard did not improve it. But the eyes were keen and fine for all there was coldness and cruelty in their hard depths. The abundant moustache was without a tinge of grey in it, but it lacked trimness, and hung over a cruel mouth like a tattered curtain. The woman knew the value of these good looks, however. They served to mask a mind and heart that knew no scruple. So it was that her reply finally came in a quick apprehensive question.

"What d'you mean?" she gasped, in her spasmodic way. "What's she done?"

Nicol laughed. It was not a pleasant laugh. He moved across to the bed and sprawled himself upon its foot, while his eyes searched the emaciated face as though

some secret speculation was going on in his mind while he talked of other things.

"She held me up with a gun," he said slowly. "That's all. She held me up! Me! And she did it with a nerve I had to reckon was pretty fine. There were twenty or more of the darn Shaunekuks around. Guess I was mad at the time. But I had to laff after."

The unmoving eyes of the woman on the bed were reading him. No mood of his could deceive her. She had learned her lesson bitterly in something like seventeen years. The man was acting now. He was laughing over an incident which filled him with a consuming rage.

"You came here to tell me about it." The voice was faint with bodily weakness, but there was no weariness in the anxious watchfulness of her eyes. "Guess you'd best tell it. It's not your way to waste time in this room with anything pleasant to hand out. It's easier for me to listen, and nothing you can say can do me much hurt."

The man laughed again. It was a laugh that was cut off abruptly.

"I don't need to look for sympathy where you are," he said. "Anyway I don't guess I need any."

"No."

The antagonism of the monosyllable was unmistakable.

Nicol shrugged.

"That swine, Snake Foot," he said. "He refused to do as I told him. He guessed Keeko needed him at the landing, and he hadn't time for me. So I took him to the flogging post."

It was said coldly. Quite without emotion.

"And you flogged him with your—quirt?"

"Sure."

The man's teeth clipped together.

"Oh, yes," he went on, after a moment. "I'm not the

sort to let a neche get away with that sort of thing. You see, I reckon I'm master around this layout."

"And Keeko?"

Again came the man's ominous laugh in reply.

"She was quick. I reckoned she was here with you. Making her fancy farewell. But she was around before I'd hardly begun. Oh, yes. She acted her show piece, and if you'd seen it I guess she'd have got your applause good. It was against me. She jumped in front of that red-skinned swine so my quirt nearly came down on her. But it didn't. And I'm glad. Guess she's too soft, and pretty, and dandy to hurt—yet. A feller doesn't feel that way with women later, when they show him the hell they've always got waiting on any fool man. She's got grit. Sure she has. It's good for a girl to have grit, and I'd say she's got it—plenty. But she put up a gun at me. And I reckon she meant to use it if need be. It's that that's the matter. That's been put into her darn fool head. That's not Keeko."

The man's manner had changed abruptly. His heavy brows depressed, and, to the listener, it was as though she could hear his teeth grit over each word he spoke. But even so she could not restrain her passionate joy at the defeat the man's words admitted.

"She beat you?" she said, a great light flooding her big eyes. "She beat you," she repeated, "and made you quit. She took your measure for the coward who could flog a wretched neche who couldn't defend himself. I'm glad."

For a moment the sting of the woman's words looked like overwhelming the man's restraint. But the black shadow of his brows suddenly lightened, and again he shrugged his heavy shoulders with a transparent indifference.

"Oh, yes," he admitted. "She beat me." Then he

added slowly, and with an appearance of deep reflection: "But then she's young. How old? Nineteen?" He nodded. "Nineteen, and as pretty as a picture. Prettier by a heap than her mother ever was." His lips parted with a noise that expressed appreciation and appetite. "Say, did you ever see such a figure? She kind of makes you think of a yearling deer, or the picture of one of those swell girls Diana always has chasing around her. And she don't know a thing but what this country's taught her—which I guess isn't a lot. But she can learn. Oh, yes. She can learn." Then with deliberate, cold emphasis: "And one of the things she'll learn is that she can't hold me up with a gun without paying for it."

The mother's eyes widened with fear, with loathing.

"What do you mean?" she cried, with a force which must have alarmed anyone who understood or cared for her bodily condition. "Pay? How can you make her pay? Oh, you don't know Keeko. You don't know what you're up against. Keeko would shoot you like a dog if you dared——"

The man raised a protesting hand and smiled into the eyes which betrayed so much.

"Easy, easy," he said. "You're jumping too far. It's taken you years, and I guess you haven't learnt yet. Guess I'll have to do better. You're one of those fool women who never learn. If you'd horse sense you wouldn't have said what you handed me just now. You're glad Keeko took my measure for a coward. You're pleased, mighty pleased she beat me. Oh, yes, I know, you've done your best she should act that way. That's because you're scared, and you don't love me like you used to. You reckon she'd shoot me like a dog. Anyway you hope so."

Nicol shook his head, and prolonged the smile with which he regarded the mother's emaciated features.

"Oh, no," he went on. "She won't shoot me like a dog. But I'll tell you what will happen. I don't mind telling you now. She won't get back till the fall. And when she comes back you won't see her. So you won't be able to hand her the things I'm saying. You're more than half dead now. You'll be all the way before she comes back, and I guess you'll be able to lie around somewhere out of sight in the woods watching the game I play. I'm going to show Keeko what a fool she was to listen to your talk. She's just going to see the dandy fellow I really am. She's going to be queen of this camp, set up on a throne I've made for her. And if I know women she's going to fall for it. There's no need for scruple. She's not my daughter. I'm not even her step-father. I've a hand full of trumps waiting for her, and when you're dead, and she gets back, I'm going to play 'em all. Then—after—when I'm tired of the game, she's going to pay for that gun play till she hates to remember the fool mother whose talk she ever listened to. We're here a thousand miles from anywhere, which is the sort of thing only a crazy woman like you could ever for— Hello! What in hell d'you want?"

Nicol sat up. In a moment his entire manner changed. He scowled threateningly as he eyed the dusky figure in the doorway. It was the squaw Lu-cana whose moccasined feet had given out no sound as she approached.

"White feller man come by river," she said, in the soft, hushed voice of her race, while her eyes refused to face the scowl of the white man.

"White man? What the hell! Who the devil is he?"

Nicol had risen to his feet, his manner brutally threatening. The squaw feared him, as did all the Indians. But in the presence of the sick white woman she found a measure of courage.

"Him wait. Him say, 'Boss Nicol, yes?'" she replied,

and stood waiting with her dark eyes fixed upon the woman she served.

But the sick woman gave no sign. Her poor troubled brain was staggered by the hideous threat which she had been forced to listen to. She lay there like a corpse prepared for burial, utterly unconcerned for that which was passing.

Just for a moment the man hesitated. He glanced back at the bed as though regretful at being dragged from his torture of the defenceless woman lying there. Then with a shrug, he moved across the room, and, thrusting the squaw aside, hurried out to meet his unexpected visitor.

. . . . . .

It was an utterly different man who shook the visitor by the hand. Nicol was smiling with a pleasant amiability. And no man could better express cordiality than he.

"It's 'Tough' Alroy," he said, as though that individual were the only person in the world he wanted to see. "Well, well," he went on heartily. "My head's just bursting with pleasure and surprise. Say, I often remember the days—and nights—in Seal Bay. Gee! This brings back times, eh? Is it just a trip or?——"

"Business."

The man grinned. He was more than well named. His black eyes were full of good-humoured deviltry. He was a type, in his picturesque buckskin, familiar enough among the trail men of the Northland. Tough, as his nickname suggested, hard, unscrupulous, ready for anything that the gods of fortune passed down to him, nothing concerned, nothing mattered so that he gathered enough for a red time at his journey's end.

"Business?"

"Yep. Lorson Harris. It's big. Guess I've a brief along with me that's to be set right into your hands, an' when you've eaten the stuff wrote ther', why, you need to light a pipe with it, an' see ther's none left over. I've been takin' a hand up to now. But ther's reasons why I've cut out. It's for you now. Can we parley?"

The trader's cordiality had become absorbed in a deeply serious regard. He was guessing hard. Lorson Harris was the one man in the world whom he seriously feared. He knew he was bound to him by chains which galled every time he strained against them. The great trader's tentacles were spread out over the length and breadth of the Northland. There was no escape from them. He had said a few moments before that here, at Fort Duggan, they were a thousand miles from anywhere. But then he was thinking of something quite different. So long as he lived in the Northland he knew he was within immediate reach of Lorson Harris. What was this message from Lorson Harris? What did it portend?

He abruptly turned and indicated the broad sill of the door of the main fort building.

"Sit right here, boy," he said, forcing himself to a return to his original cordiality. "Guess there's room for us both. We can talk till you're tired here. After we're through I don't seem to see any difficulty in raking out a bucket of red-hot fire juice or any other old thing you happen to fancy."

Tough Alroy grinned and accepted the invitation.

"That's the talk," he said. "Here's Lorson's letter. You read that right away, and I'll make a big talk after."

The two men sat down, and while Nicol tore open the dirty envelope, and read his taskmaster's orders, Tough lit a pipe, and watched him out of the corners of his black, restless, wicked eyes.

CHAPTER VI

THE KING OF THE FOREST

A ROAR of fury echoes through the primeval forest. It plays amidst the countless aisles of jack-pine. It loses itself in the dense growing tamarack, or dies amidst the softer plumage of spruce. It is no mere bellow of impotent rage. It is a note of defiance. It is a challenge to the legions of the forest. It is the gage of battle flung without reserve.

Wide-set eyes blaze their search amidst the deeper shadows. They are eager as well as furious. They are seeking an adversary who shuns open conflict and wounds from afar. The great head is proudly raised aloft, and gaping nostrils on a great clubbed muzzle snuff violently at the air. A treacherous blow has torn open the channels of life and saturated the heaving flanks with their rich, red tide. The King Moose stands at bay.

With the last echo, the challenge is flung again. It is ruthless, insistent, and deep with the violence of outraged might.

The answer comes. It comes in man's own good time. It comes in the crack of a rifle, and the moose jolts round with a spasmodic jerk. In a moment a movement amongst the surrounding tree-trunks captures its gaze. There is a pause, breathless, silent. Savage wrath leaps anew, and down sweeps the great head till the spread of

antlers is couched like a forest of lance points. The huge body is hurled in a headlong charge.

It is an act of supreme courage as splendid as it is hopeless. The elusive foe applies a wit, a skill undreamed of in the beast mind. He is gone in a flash, and the wounded creature stands amazed, furious, baulked, while vicious hoofs churn the soil, and a deep-throated roar awakens again the echoes of the forest.

But there is desperation added to defiance in the challenge now. There is uncertainty, too. The heaving flanks are dripping with a crimson tide. The creature is sorely wounded. For all its pride and courage, its sufferings admit of no denial. The foe has scored. He has scored heavily.

The climax is approaching. The final challenge is taken up at last as the king beast would have it.

The man reappears. In a moment he is standing out amidst the tree-trunks, slim, erect, a puny figure in a world of giants. He is not so cowardly after all. He stands there calmly, with eyes alert, watchful, measuring, ready to gamble his wit and skill against whatever odds may chance.

The moose only sees. It has no thought. Only its rage. No calculation but its immense strength. Savagery, courage, alone inspire its warfare. So it is that fierce satisfaction rings in its greeting of the vision.

It is a moment pregnant with possibility. The doomed creature summons its last ounce of physical might. Down drops the head till the hot blast of nostrils flings up the mouldering soil of the ages. The great split hoofs stamp a furious tattoo. They claw at the loose earth. Then, like a flash, an avalanche of rage is flung into the combat.

The time has come. The man has played his game to the desired end. The creature's fury has no terror for

him. With his rifle pressed to his shoulder, and eye glancing over the sights, he waits calmly, and full of simple confidence. Twenty yards! Fifteen! With the low, sweeping antlers, and the rush of hoofs that could disembowel at a single blow, it is a desperate test of nerve. Slowly, gently, a finger compresses itself about the trigger.

But something happens. The moose flounders in its rush. It is the ungainly roll of a rudderless ship. It stumbles. A second, and its mad rush ends. With a curious gasping sigh it plunges to the earth.

And the man? With his undischarged weapon lowered from his shoulder, and the sharp crack of some stranger's rifle ringing in his ears, he stares about him in utter and complete bewilderment.

Marcel's bewilderment was swiftly passing. Hot, impulsive resentment was quick to take its place. All his mind and heart had been set upon that kill. He had been robbed. Someone had robbed him in the very moment of his victory, a victory which had cost him nine days of an arduous trail.

There was no sign. No sign anywhere. The silence of the world about him was complete, that silence which no earthly agency ever seems to have power to break up seriously. Like the fallen moose his angry eyes searched the shadowed aisles for the intruder upon whom to vent his hasty wrath. But like that other there only remained disappointment to add to the fire of his anger. He seemed alone in the primordial world. And yet he knew that other eyes, human eyes, were observing his every movement.

At last he abandoned his search, and turned again to the creature stretched in the stillness of death upon the mouldering carpet of the forest. The bitterness of regret had replaced his impulsive heat. Perhaps, even

the philosophy of the hunter had yielded him resignation. At any rate he quickly became absorbed in the splendid qualities of the fallen monarch. And that which he beheld stirred anew his youthful enthusiasm.

It was an old bull, hoary with age, and scarred with the wounds of a hundred battles. It was truly a king in a world where might alone prevails. He moved up to the wide-spreading antlers supporting the regal head, as if to refuse it the final degradation of complete contact with the soil. An exclamation of appreciation broke from him. His gaze was fixed upon a minute, blood-rimmed puncture just behind the right eye. It was the wound where the intruder's bullet had crashed into the infuriated creature's brain.

"Gee! That's a swell shot!" he muttered, speaking his thought aloud, with the habit bred of the great silences.

"But I'm sorry—now."

No echo of the forest could have startled more. No spur could have stirred Marcel to swifter movement. He was erect in a moment, and turned about, towering in his generous height over the slim creature smiling up into his bewildered eyes. A white girl, wide-eyed, beautiful, was standing before him.

"Now?"

Marcel echoed the stranger's final word stupidly.

"Yes. I'm grieved all to death—now," the girl said, with a composure in striking contrast to Marcel's obvious confusion. "I just am. I hadn't right. But I was scared—scared to death. You don't understand that. Why, sure you don't. How could you? You're a man. I'm only a girl. And I had to stand around, just waiting, with another feller within a yard or so of sheer death, while all the time I had means in my hand of fixing things right for him. That's how it was when I saw that moose

breaking for you. And you—why, you just looked like two cents standing there while that feller's hoofs and horns wanted to leave you feed for the timber wolves. I couldn't stand it. My nerve broke. I drew on him. I had to. I loosed off. Then, I s'pose, I woke up. When I saw him drop I knew just what I'd done. I'd stolen your beast, and—I'm sorry to death."

A girl. A white girl. Oh, yes, there was no mistake, for all the mannishness of her clothing. Marcel stared. He had listened to her words of regret barely comprehending their drift. He was absorbed by that which he beheld, wondering, amazed.

A white girl here, alone in the primordial world of—Unaga.

From the pretty, fair hair peeping from under her beaver cap to the moccasined feet, so absurdly small, under the wide-cut buckskin chapps or trousers that clad her nether limbs, he searched stupidly for the answer to the thousand questions which flooded his brain. Who was she? How came she there? That amazing shot?

He noted her eyes, so wide and deep-fringed, and of a blue such as he had never yet beheld in the Northern skies. Their dazzling light left him almost dizzy with intoxication. Her cheeks, perfect, with the bloom of health acquired in a life of exposure to the elements. Then her sweet lips parted in a smile that revealed a hint of even teeth of pearly whiteness. But these things were not all. No. There was her tall, slim figure under its buckskin clothing. The effect was superlative.

What a vision for passionate youthful eyes to gaze upon in the shadowed world of the Northern forests, where life and death rub shoulders every moment of time. The youth in Marcel was aflame. There flashed through his mind a vague memory of the wooing of the painted women of Seal Bay.

The girl's explanation, her regrets, meant nothing to him.

"What—? Where? Who are you?" he blurted, all his amazed delight flung into a startled demand.

"I'm Keeko."

The reply was without a shadow of hesitation. It came simply, for the wide, amused eyes had seen the youth's confusion, and the woman's mind behind them approved.

"I'm Keeko," the girl repeated, as Marcel still struggled for composure. "And I came right along in a hurry to tell you I'm sorry——"

Marcel thrust up a hand and pushed back his cap. It was a movement full of significance.

"Sorry?" he cried, with an awkward laugh. "Guess you don't need to be sorry. I need to feel that way, acting foolish, gawking around here like some fool kid. But—you see—you're a—girl."

Keeko's smile broadened into a delicious ripple of laughter.

"Sure," she nodded. "You didn't guess I was a—jack-rabbit?"

Marcel was recovering. He, too, laughed.

"I didn't guess anything," he said. Then with a gesture of helplessness which further added to Keeko's amusement: "I couldn't. You see I'm—well—I'm just darned! That's all—just darned!"

"I know," the girl cried delightedly. "You didn't guess to find a girl around. You weren't looking to find anything diff'rent from those things they sort of experimented with when they first reckoned making a camping ground in space for life to move around on. But you haven't said about that old moose. I robbed you——"

"Oh, hell!" Marcel cried, flinging his head back in a happy, buoyant laugh. "We'll just cut that darn old

moose right out of this thing. You're welcome to shoot up any old thing I've got. You're Keeko——"

"Who are you?"

"I—oh, I'm Marcel, and I come from—" He broke off and shook his head. "No, I can't hand you that."

Marcel gazed down into the girl's pretty eyes. He had only just remembered in time. Somehow this girl seemed to have robbed him of his wits as well as his moose.

"Say," he went on, a moment later, with a sobering of his happy eyes. "I came near making a bad break that time. You see, I just can't tell you where I come from. There's secrets in the darn old Northland some folks would give a heap of dollars to get wise to. Where I come from is one of 'em. What I'm free to tell is I'm mostly a pelt hunter. I've a biggish outfit of Eskimo, and the usual truck of the summer trail, back there on the river that comes out of the east. We've got this territory cached with food dumps and things, and we're out, scattered miles over the country, beating it for pelts with trap and gun. Guess we figger to stop right out till it starts in to freeze up. And just about the time the old sun gets sick worrying to make Unaga a fit place for better than skitters and things, and chases off for its winter sleep, why we're hitting right back to—the place I come from. I've been making the summer trail ever since I was a kid, which isn't a long way back, and I allow this is the first time it's ever been my luck to find better than the silences that's liable to set you plumb crazed if you don't happen to have been born to 'em, the same as I was. Guess that's about all there is to me I know of, except that secret I can't just hand you."

It was all said so frankly, so simply. It was not the story Marcel had to tell that established confidence. It was the telling of it. And it needed no words from the

girl to admit her approval. It was shining in her smiling eyes, while a wonderful feeling began to stir in a heart that was only a shade less simple than the heart of the youth.

Keeko, woman-like, applied no reason where her feelings were concerned. She liked the man, and she liked the name he called himself by. She liked his great, height and breadth of shoulder, and she liked his clear, handsome eyes with their ingenuous smile. That was sufficient.

She nodded with that intimate air of sympathy.

"I know," she said readily. "It's a land of secrets north of 60°. That's why folks live in a country that can't ever get out of its eternal sleep, and only the nightmare of storm disturbs it. The secret isn't usually ours. The secret mostly belongs to those who brought us here, and though maybe we don't understand it right, why, the thing just grows up in our minds, and we find we couldn't talk of it to strangers any more than if it was our own. That's the way of it. It's a country that starts in to break your kid's heart, and ends by making you love it—if it doesn't kill you."

"Oh, yes. I love this old north," she went on with gentle warmth. "Maybe you do, too. It's half-baked and dead-tough anyway. But it teaches even a girl the things it doesn't hurt anyone to know. It's good for us all to get up against Nature in the cold raw. Guess if I was back in a city the biggest thing in my life would likely be squeezing hands made to do things with into gloves that weren't. Or maybe reckoning up which beau could hand me the best time before I got too old to count. It isn't that way here. The north teaches you to think and act right, and you don't have to worry that the girl next door's wearing a later mode in shirt waists than you. No. Man or woman, we've got to make good

or go under. We're all here for that, only some of us don't know it. I'm kind of glad I've learned it, and I'm mighty grateful to those who've taught me. That's why I'm out on the summer trail same as you. But I've only a small outfit. Three neches and two canoes back there on the river that comes up out of the south, and doesn't quit till it reaches the seas of snow and ice that never thaw. We can't chase the territory wide like you can. We can't carry food for caches, or make the big portages. So we hunt the river, and a day's trail on either bank. There's beaver and fox to be had that way, and it's most all I can hope for. I don't worry if we get it plenty. You see, I need it big—this trip."

Something of the strangeness of the encounter was passing from Marcel's mind. A curious feeling of intimacy was induced by the girl's brief outline of the things that concerned herself. Then, above all, there was that youthful desire, untainted by any baseness of passion, the natural desire inspired by the appeal of a sweet face, and the smiling eyes of a young girl, battling in a country where there is no margin for the strongest of men.

Nor had Marcel forgotten all the early teachings of Uncle Steve. He knew it was demanded of him that woman, in all her moods, was man's heritage to help, to protect, to relieve, where possible, of those heavy burdens with which nature so mercilessly weighs her down. The opening lay there to his hand, and he seized upon it with an impulse that needed nothing to support it.

"You're needing pelts?" he cried. "Why, that's great!"

Keeko laughed shortly. She failed to realize the thought prompting Marcel's evident delight.

"It would be greater if I didn't," she returned, with a rueful shake of the head.

"How's that?"

"Why it's days since our traps have shown us so much as a wolf track. And it's nearly a week since we took our last beaver. There's three months of the season left, and I'm needing a three-thousand-dollar trade with Lorson Harris at Seal Bay. Maybe you don't know what that means?"

"Maybe I do," Marcel laughed.

"You do?" Keeko was forced to a responsive laugh. "Yes. It means a whole lot," she went on. "And—I don't guess we've taken five hundred dollars yet—at his price. Last year I took three silver foxes, and a brace of jet black beauties that didn't set him squealing at fifty dollars each. No. They were jo-dandies," she sighed appreciatively. "But it hasn't been that way this season," she continued, with pathetic regret. "It seems like there isn't a single fox this side of the big north hills."

Marcel shook his head.

"But there is," he said very definitely.

"Is there?" Keeko shook her head. "Then I must have been looking the other way most all the time."

A reply hovered upon Marcel's lips. But he seemed to change his mind. He could not stand the obscuring of the sun of the girl's pretty eyes. He turned away, and laid his rifle aside. Then he sprawled his big body at the foot of an adjacent tree, and sat with his wide shoulders propped against it for support.

"Say, Keeko," he cried, gazing up into the troubled eyes watching him, and addressing the girl by name for the first time, "let's sit. We've got to make a big talk. Anyway, I have. I feel like one of those fool neches sitting in a war council, and handing out wisdom that wouldn't fool a half-hatched skitter. Still, I reckon I've got one hell of a notion, and notions worry me to death if I can't hand 'em on to some feller who can't defend

himself. I'm not often worried that way. Will you listen awhile?"

Marcel's effort was not without effect. The girl's eyes cleared of their shadows, swept away by a smiling amusement. She found him quite irresistible in the gloom of her twilight surroundings, and forthwith permitted herself to subside upon the ground opposite him, with legs crossed, and her rifle lying across her knees.

"It's easy listening," she said with a laugh.

"Good!"

Marcel laughed, too.

"Now, it's this," he began, with a profound solemnity that delighted the girl. "If I hand you anything you don't fancy listening to, why, say so right away, and I'll quit. You see, I don't get much practice handing it out to a girl, and I'm liable to make breaks—bad breaks. You see, we're mostly a thousand miles outside the world, and you're a lone girl in a hell of a lone land. I'd be thankful for you to get hold of it that I was raised to reckon a girl needs all the help a decent man can hand her. That's his duty. Plumb. And he hasn't a right on earth to figger on any return. Well, I haven't got over that notion yet. It goes with me every time, and I pray the good God of this darnation wilderness it always will. I allow this is just preliminary, to make you feel good before I start in to talk. It isn't the sermon you may guess it is, so that'll make it easier remembering what lies back of my head when you start—guessing."

Marcel produced a pipe and stuffed it with the tobacco he flaked off a sad-looking plug. The pipe was crudely carved in Eskimo fashion out of the ivory of a walrus tusk. Keeko watched him silently with an interest she made no attempt to disguise, while deep in her heart was stirring that feeling she was wholly unconscious of. His

"preliminary" was unnecessary. In her woman's way she read him to her own satisfaction.

He lit his pipe carefully, and as carefully extinguished his match. They were in a forest where the decaying vegetation was as dry as tinder.

"You need pelts," he said, after a considering pause. "You need three thousand dollars trade in 'em. You want silver fox and black fox. Well—you can have enough to set Lorson Harris squealing."

Keeko was startled.

"But—I don't get you!" she cried, with the helplessness of complete amazement.

"It's easy."

Marcel smoked on in leisurely enjoyment of the surprise he had given this nymph of the primordial.

Keeko shook her head.

"You mean—" she broke off. "No, you're a pelt hunter yourself. You said so. We're rivals on the fur trail."

"Rivals?" Marcel sat up in his turn. "We can't be," he said earnestly. "I'm some sort of a man. You're a —girl. You've forgotten."

They sat regarding each other. A great hope was in Marcel's heart. In fancy he was picturing to himself months of this girl's companionship in the deep silences and tremendous solitudes which had become so much a part of his life. He had visions of this tall, beautiful creature always by his side, ready, skilful, eager. With the sympathy of their craft always between them, and, for himself, a purpose, an incentive such as never in his life had he possessed. The contemplation of it all was too wonderful for words. It was a dream, a happy, wonderful dream.

But for Keeko it was all different. She was not concerned with a dream future. She was thinking of the

generosity, the reckless generosity that set this splendid youth desirous of yielding all to satisfy her needs. He asked no question as to those needs. He knew nothing of her, or of those shadows lurking in her background. He only understood that she wanted, and it was his pleasure and purpose to supply that want at his own expense.

"I haven't forgotten," she said, with something like a sigh. "But you want to hand me furs that are your own trade. And I—I can't accept them."

She shook her head definitely. Then with an effort she thrust the regret she felt into the background, and her eyes lit with a smile of humour.

"You haven't heard the notion *I* was raised to—yet," she said.

"No."

Marcel was satisfied with the return of her smile.

"Would you like to?"

"Sure."

The girl laughed.

"I guess it's not as simple as yours," she said. "A woman's reason isn't generally simple. You see, she musses up feelings with argument which generally confuse the issue. Guess a woman's life is mostly a thing of confusion. You see, she started bad, though it wasn't her fault. When the folks, who ought to know better, started in to make man before his mother you can't wonder it's that way. Now I was raised to believe man is woman's rightful protector. There's women who reckon she's got man left standing when it comes to helping things along. But she's the sort of woman who always cooks her own favourite dish when she reckons to give her man a real treat. There's the other woman who's so sure man is her rightful protector that she's not content to wait around for his protection. She gets

right out and grabs it, along with anything else he's foolish enough to leave within her reach. Then there's the woman who shouts around that she doesn't need protecting anyway. She mostly ends up with grabbing all the man-protection that happens to be lying around, without worrying whose 'claim' she's jumping. But to get back to the notion I was raised to, it seems to me that man is surely a woman's rightful protector, but there isn't a thing on earth can make me see that she's the right to take any sort of protection he hasn't the right to give. That sort of woman's a vampire. And vampires are things I'd like to see drowned so deep they can't ever resurrect. If I took your pelts I'd be a vampire for taking something you haven't the right to give. They're your trade, and I guess out of your trade you've got to pay your outfit of Eskimo. Do you see? To my way of thinking those furs are not yours to give, just because you find a fool girl squealing for three thousand dollars of trade. But say," she added, with a warmth of real feeling in her smiling eyes, "I thank you for the thought. I thank you right from the bottom of my heart."

Marcel remained quite undisturbed. He sat deliberately puffing at his absurdly ornamented pipe, his honest eyes meditatively smiling. The girl's rejection of his offer only made him the more determined. At last he stirred, and sat up cross-legged, and, removing his pipe, pointed his words with its stem, as though to drive them more fully home.

"That's all right," he said. "I'm making no kick on that. It just makes me feel how sore you need those pelts, and how right I am to want to hand 'em to you. I've told you what I fancy doing. Now we'll form a committee and negotiate. Folks always form committees when they can't agree, and then they can't agree worse. Committees always elect one of their members

chairman, and he has a casting vote. We're a committee of two, so we'll elect a chairman, and that'll make three—chairman with casting vote. I'll elect myself chairman. That way we'll have no sort of difficulty. All in favour, etc." He thrust up both hands and his pipe while he boyishly gazed up at them with a triumphant smile.

"Carried unanimously," he cried. "Now I've two says to your one——"

"I was reckoning it was more than that," Keeko interrupted, laughing.

"Were you? Maybe you're right," Marcel agreed. "Well, say, let's cut the fooling. See here, Keeko," he went on earnestly. "I've got all the pelts you need to my own share. I wouldn't be robbing even an Eskimo, who most folks reckon to rob. As for me, I'm no sort of real trader. I just hunt pelts because it suits me, and I like to hear Lorson Harris squeal when I make him pay my prices. Still, you don't reckon to accept, that way. That being so, how's this? I'm just free as air to hunt where I choose. My outfit's scattered, and each hunts on his own. Well, I've all the catch I need. You can guess that, seeing I've given nine days and nights to trailing this old moose that isn't worth the cost of the powder that shot him up. Cut me out as a trader. Just take me on as guide. I'll join your outfit till it freezes up, and I'll find you the best foxes the North Country ever produced. I'll promise you that three thousand dollars and to spare. It isn't bluff. It's just God's truth. And if you feel like you're sick to death of the sight of what folks who's friendly call my face any old time, why you only need to say things, and I'll hit a trail out of sight at a gait that would leave a caribou flapping its ears with worry. I mean that, every darn word, and the chairman and half this fool committee are voting for it. Well?"

The appeal was irresistible. Keeko would have been less than the woman she was had she further resisted the happy enthusiasm and youthful impulse of this great creature who had been a stranger to her less than an hour ago. There was honesty and confidence in every word he uttered, and there was that simple boyish admiration in his good-looking eyes which made the final unconscious appeal. She yielded, yielded in that spirit which promptly left Marcel her slave for all time.

Her eyes were brimming with a smile that possessed the moisture of tears of thankfulness.

"Guess this committee is unanimous," she said. "There's no argument left in them. But it wants to record the biggest vote of thanks to the chairman that was ever passed—and doesn't know how to express it. We——"

But Marcel was on his feet and holding out his great hands to help the girl to hers. His eyes were wide and shining in a way that must have lit a happy smile in the steady eyes of Uncle Steve, had he been there to witness.

"Where's your camp?" he cried. "I need to start my job right away."

The man's demand was thrilling with the feelings of the moment. Keeko ignored his help. She, too, was on her feet in a moment, and pointing away amongst the shadows of the forest to the west.

"Back on the river," she cried, catching something of the infection of the other's headlong impulse. Then with a glance down at the fallen moose which had been the means of bringing them together, her tone altered to one of almost tenderness. "But this?" she questioned.

Marcel laughed.

'Don't worry with that. I'll come along for the skull and the horns when the wolves have done with it. I've quit big game. I'm out for fox, silver and black. I'm out to break Lorson Harris's bank roll—for you. Come on!"

CHAPTER VII

SUMMER DAYS

THE youth in Marcel was abundant, it was even headlong. But even so, there was a strong steadying strain of wisdom in him, the wisdom of the Northland, bought at a price that few can afford to pay. It served to hold the balance under the influence of this new adventure.

It was something more than adventure. There was a significance in the extraordinary encounter with Keeko that dimmed to the commonplace every thrill he had ever experienced in the past. It had lifted him at a bound to that pinnacle of manhood, which until the moment when woman presents herself upon youth's stage of life can never be reached.

Every pre-conceived object in life had suddenly been brushed aside by the exhilaration of the moment. The subdued colours of his horizon had been completely overwhelmed by the new radiance. Even Uncle Steve, that precious guide and friend, who had always occupied the central place in his focus, had almost been forgotten.

For Keeko, too, whose youth had been shadowed from the moment understanding had broken through the golden mists of childhood's dream-world, a new meaning to life had been born. She made no attempt to look ahead, and the shadows of the past had no power whatever to rob her of one moment of chaste delight. All she

knew, or cared, was that, almost on the instant, the personality of something over six feet of manhood had taken possession of her will. And, with that splendid abandon which generous nature mercifully ordains for youth, she yielded herself to the ecstasy of it.

Keeko was resting upon a fallen tree-trunk. It had been torn up by the roots and flung headlong by the merciless fury of a winter storm. Marcel was standing beside her. The way had been long, but there was no real weariness in either. They had simply paused at their journey's end to survey the great gorge lying at their feet. In the heart of it lay the highway that came up out of the south.

It was a scene of crude immensity which left all life infinitesimal. The barren of it suggested the body of Nature gnawed to the bone, picked clean of the fair flesh with which it is her wont to distract the eyes and senses of man. There lay a frowning, rockbound chasm at their feet, and deep down in the heart of it a broad, sluggish stream. The two youthful figures were gazing out across the gaping lips at the far-off, distant hills rising up in defence of the secrets of the Northern seas of snow and ice.

For some moments they sat in silence before the might and mystery of that untrodden world. Awe lurked in the eyes of both. It was that awe of the Northland which breeds terror in the weak, and only the strong may survive.

Marcel broke the spell of it. He laughed with a quiet confidence that found no echo in the girl's heart.

"It's pretty darn big," he said, with something almost like contempt in his tone. "But it pays us—toll. I—a man. And you—why, you just a—girl."

It was the pride of youth and strength that spoke. Uncle Steve would not have talked that way—now.

Years ago—perhaps. Years ago before his terrible journey across Unaga, when he, too, had defied the very things Marcel now spurned.

But the awe in Keeko's eyes only deepened.

"Maybe you're right," she said doubtfully. "But sometimes it scares me. Scares me to death."

She drew a long breath as she made the admission.

Marcel's quick answer came with a laugh of amusement.

"Yet you come up this river with just three neches," he cried. "You make rapids that would hold me guessing, for all the outfit of Eskimo I carry. You'll beat it back south to your home against a two mile stream with a deadly winter hard on your moccasined heels. I just want to laff. You're scared! Why, get a look right out there, just as far as you can see. I mean where the haze shuts down like a curtain on a forbidden world. There, where there's the dim outline of one big hill propping up the roof of things, standing above all the others. If you took the notion there were pelts there that would worry Lorson Harris to pay for, you'd think no more of making those hills than you worry with the trail over this darn river. That scare notion isn't worth two cents."

The admiration, the obvious delight of Marcel as he derided the girl's plea left a great warmth of pleasure flooding Keeko's eyes.

"You think that?" she cried. Then with a nod: "I'm kind of glad. But you don't know Little One Man—yet. And Snake Foot. And Med'cine Charlie. It isn't me. I've maybe the will. But—I haven't the skill, or the grit. No. My boys were raised on the rapids of the Dubawnt River. If you heard Little One Man I guess you'd know just what that means. As for me, I've learned things from necessity. I had to learn, same as I've to collect those furs Lorson Harris is going

to pay for. Oh, I'm not full of a courage like you think. It's will. Will bred of necessity. It's the sort of will that can't reckon the balance of chances. Chances just don't exist. That's all. It's as you say. That ghost of a hill yonder would have to hand me what I need if I couldn't get it nearer home. But I'd be scared—sure. Badly scared, same as I felt watching you waiting on that moose."

Marcel withdrew his gaze from the tremendous view beyond the river. He turned to the scene of the little encampment so far down below. He saw a moving figure by the canoes, beached on the barren foreshore. He beheld the curl of smoke rising from a camp-fire. He knew that a meal was in preparation. It was all as he understood such things, and its interest for him was that it was the home of the girl who had so suddenly taken possession of his life.

"Necessity," he said reflectively. "Guess I'm not just wise to things like older folk. But it seems to me 'necessity' is the thing of all things in life. It sort of seems the key that unlocks the meaning of everything. It sets you chasing pelts to sell for dollars, and it leaves their finding just the one thing worth while. If you got plenty food you don't care two cents if you eat it or not. If you haven't, why the thought of food sets you dreaming beautiful dreams of things you never tasted, and maybe you'd hate anyway if folks handed them to you. If you got a swell bed that's all set ready for you, maybe your fancy sets you sleeping on the hard ground with just a blanket to cover you. If you hadn't, then the thought of that darn blanket would likely set you crazy to grab the other feller's. I come along out every season chasing pelts. Seeing I don't need 'em it leaves me trailing a bull moose that hands me a chance of getting to grips with the business of life an' death. Say, give me

'necessity' all the time. It's the thing that makes men of the folks you can make anything of at all, and, anyway, makes life a thing to grab right up into your arms and hug so as if you never meant to let go. Necessity for you—a girl—is just the thing that beats me. Why, the men folk around you must be all sorts of everyday folk that wouldn't matter a circumstance if the whole darn lot got lost in the fog of their own notions, and were left to hand in their checks hollering for the help they never fancied handing you."

There was hot indignation in the final denunciation. Keeko revelled in his sympathy. She pondered a moment. Then a fresh impulse urged her.

"I was just wondering," she said, her gaze avoiding the figure standing so heedlessly at the brink of the canyon, "I kind of feel I ought to tell you of that necessity. Yet it's hard. As I said, there's secrets, and if you start in to talk free north of 60° you're liable to hand over those secrets that belong to the folk who reckon they've the right to impose them on all those belonging to them. I've no sort of secret of my own. None at all. But I guess my step-father has. And that secret is the reason that's brought him to face the storms and evil spirits of Unaga." She laughed without any lightness. "Will you be content to hear the things I may tell you—without asking me to show you how it is these things are so?" she demanded.

"I don't ask a thing," the man replied promptly. "I don't need to know a thing. You don't get the way I feel. You're a girl. You need furs for trade. Guess that trade means the whole of everything to you, and is liable to make you plenty happy. Well—why, it pleases me to death to help you. That's all."

For a moment Keeko let her wide blue eyes dwell on the man's youthful face.

"That only makes me want to say things more," she retorted, with a slight flush dyeing her soft cheeks. "So I'm just going to say those things right away, and I don't care what secret I hand out doing it. When a man's generosity gets busy it's to limits mostly a long way ahead. Well, when it's that way I don't reckon a woman feels like slamming the door in his face. I've a step-father and a mother. My mother's sick—sick to death. She's all I've got, and all I care for. She's kind of a weak woman who's been up against most of the worry and kicks a world can hand her. And now she's sick to death, and looks like getting that peace that life never seemed to be able to hand her. My step-father's a tough man, and I hate him. Say, you guess that my scare isn't worth two cents. I'm scared of my step-father like nothing else in the world. Oh, I'm not scared that he might raise a club at me. That wouldn't worry me a thing. Guess I could deal with that—right. No. I'm not scared that way. It's something different, and it's come through nothing he's ever done or threatened against—me. No, it's my poor mother. I tell you he's letting her die. He's been letting her die all these years when I wasn't old enough to understand. He wants to be rid of her. He's just a murderer at heart, because he's letting her die through neglect he's figgered out. And my mother isn't only a sick woman dying of the consumption the life he's exposed her to has brought on. She's got a broken heart that he's handed her. But sick as she is, she's wise, and she lies abed thinking not for herself but for me—all the time. And lying there she's worked out a way so I'll be able to get free of my step-father, and play a hand in life on my own when she's gone. It was she taught me to handle a rifle when I'd got hands strong enough to hold it. It was she who set me in the charge of Little One Man years ago, and with

Snake Foot and Charlie, to learn the business of pelt hunting. Then when I'd learned all she reckoned I need she lay around and figgered things out further. It was all done without fuss, it was all done in a small way so my step-father shouldn't guess the meaning. She just grew me into a pelt hunter who he thought some day would be useful hunting for him, and he was kind of pleased. Oh, yes, I hunt for him, but for every dollar I make for him there's five for myself. And those five are hidden deep so he'll never find them. I've done this five seasons, and my sick mother reckons this is to be my last. She guesses she'll never see another spring, and she wants to see me with five thousand dollars clear when I get back to home. Then, when she's gone, she wants me to hit the trail quick. She wants me to take Little One Man and Snake Foot and Charlie with me, and, with my five thousand dollars, she wants me to look around beyond my step-father's reach, and make good in the craft I've learned. With that thought in her mind she guesses to lie easy in the grave she reckons I'll see is made right for her. That's my 'necessity' and it's big—if you could only see into the notions of two women."

Marcel listened without a word of comment. And as he listened his eyes hardened, and the youthful curves about his lips drew tight into fine lines. For all his inexperience of the lives of others the story set a fierce anger raging in his hot, impulsive heart. The unthinkable to him was a man who could so beset a woman.

He nodded.

"And you trade the pelts with Lorson Harris?" he said.

"Sure." Keeko smiled up into his face. It was the shrewd smile of one who approves her own subtlety. "But I divide the catch before I make home. Five-sixths are for me. And I set them aside, and Little One

Man helps me cache them. The rest is the catch I hand my step-father. He makes careful tab of it, and then, after a rest, I set out with the dogs over the winter trail for Seal Bay to make trade. Oh, it's easy. We pick up the cache as we go, and trade the whole, and I just hand my step-father the price of the furs he's tabbed."

The girl's smile was infectious.

"It's bright," Marcel cried. "And—and I'm glad." Then his eyes sobered at the thought of his own purpose. "It's easy, too," he went on eagerly. "But it's going to be easier. We'll fool this—cur. We'll fool him as he doesn't dream. Say, you didn't need to tell me, Keeko. There wasn't any need. Still, it shows the trust you feel. And it makes me glad. Now I'll tell you the notion I've fixed. You're going to get a whole heap more than that three-thousand-dollar trade. You surely are. And when you go back you'll be free of—of him, just as far as dollars can make you. But I'm hoping you'll go back feeling better than that. Maybe you'll be able to feel that when your poor sick mother is gone you aren't just alone in the world with Little One Man and Snake Foot and Charlie. There's another feller just waiting around to hand you all the help you need any old time. And this old tree-trunk you're sitting on will find me all the time. We'll make a cache in it. And each end of the open season I'll get around and open the cache. Come here yourself, or send word by Little One Man, and, just as hard as I can lay paddle to the waters of this old river, I'll beat it to your help for all that's in me. Maybe I'm only a kid chasing pelts, but I'd be mighty thankful to Providence for the chance of making good helping you." He laughed with the full sun of his optimism shining again as he flung out a hand. "Say, shake on it, Keeko! We're partners in an enterprise to beat a devil man. Do you know what that means? You've likely got your

notions. I've got the notion that was handed me by the best man in the world and a dark-faced angel woman. It means you can just claim me to the last breath. That's so. It surely is."

Keeko took the hand that was thrust out at her. And in a moment her own was crushed gently between the youth's warm, strong palms. And the pressure of them thrilled the girl as nothing else had ever thrilled her in her life.

Her only answer was to gaze up at him with wide, thankful eyes. She had no words. She felt that any attempt to speak must choke her. So she sat there on the ages-old trunk, with a wild feeling of unaccountable emotion in utter and complete possession of her soul.

Marcel abruptly seated himself beside her on the tree-trunk.

"Say, Keeko," he cried, his seriousness gone, "guess this has been all sorts of a talk, and I've blown a horn that would have worried the angel Gabriel. Well, I've just got to make good—that's all. That being so, there isn't a day to waste. I'll have to hit back to my outfit and collect my 'truck,' which I need to tote along over here. It'll take me all a piece of time, but not an hour longer than my craze to start'll let it. I'll get back in a hell of a hurry. Meanwhile you need to put Little One Man and Snake Foot and Charlie wise, and see and fix things to start out right away. We're going to hit out northwest to a silver fox country I know of, and when we're through with it Lorson Harris'll start in to drop silver fox prices to the level of grey timber wolf. It makes me feel good—the thought of it."

He sprang up with an energy that suggested the effort it required to tear himself away. And promptly the woman in Keeko asserted itself.

"But you'll eat first?" she said invitingly.

Marcel laughed in frank delight.

"Why, surely," he cried. "I was guessing you might ask me."

Keeko joined in his laugh. They were children at heart, and little more in years.

CHAPTER VIII

THE HEART OF THE WILDERNESS

MARCEL and Keeko were standing at the dawn of a new life. The man had looked into a woman's wide, blue eyes. He had gazed upon softly rounded cheeks, as perfect as physical well-being could make them. He had contemplated rich, ripe lips that tempted him well-nigh to distraction. Thus it was that the passionless life of the outworld had no longer power before the stirring of a soul at last awakened from its pristine slumbers.

The meaning of their encounter was no less for Keeko. She was less of the wilderness, perhaps, than Marcel. She had not been so wholly bred to it as he. Her child's eyes had looked upon some measure of civilization, and her mind had gathered a brief training amongst the youth of her own sex. But the result was no less. The grey shadows, which, as far back as she could remember, had overhung her home life seemed suddenly to have been lifted, and the rugged desolation of the Northland had been transformed into a veritable Eden of hope and delight.

It was his new inspiration that lent wings to the feet of Marcel when he hastened to collect his personal outfit. It was under the same inspiration that he flung himself into the task of preparing for the fulfilment of his pledge. And from the moment he joined the girl's outfit on the banks of the river that came up out of

the south he became the acknowledged leader, whose will was absolute.

And Keeko's spirit was swift to respond. She displayed a readiness that must have astonished the Indians who were accustomed to implicit acknowledgment of her rule. Or, perhaps, in their savage hearts, they understood something of the change that had been wrought. Here was a great white man, a man whose power and abilities they were quick to recognize and appreciate, whose body was great, and whose eye was clear and commanding. Here was a white girl, fairer than any they had ever known, and whose spirit had served them in a hundred ways. Well? What then? They were all men of maturing years—these Indians. They had had many squaws of their own. Perhaps? Who could tell? It seemed natural that Keeko should choose her man from those of her own colour. And if this man were to be the chosen one they were ready to yield him the same fidelity they would yield to her.

So the night before the morning of departure came round. In three days Marcel had completed every preparation, and all was in readiness for the earliest possible start.

By the time supper was finished the summer daylight showed no sign of giving way to the two-hour night. Marcel had that in his mind which he was determined to do before their well-earned rest beside the camp-fire was taken. And he pointed at the iron-bound cliff which frowned down upon the waters of the river.

"Say, Keeko, I've a notion to set it up before we quit," he said, with a laugh. "Do you feel like passing me a hand?"

Keeko turned from the sluggish waters, black with the reflection of the barren walls of the gorge.

"What are you going to set up?" she questioned like

one dragged back from the contemplation of happy dreams.

"Oh, it's just a notion," Marcel laughed, in a boyish, half shamefaced fashion as he lit his pipe with a firebrand. "Will you—come along?"

Keeko was on her feet in a moment. For all the days of labour there was no weariness in her body. Besides——

"Guess you're handing me a mystery," she cried happily. "Seeing I'm a woman I can't just miss it."

So they passed up the rugged foreshore to the foot of the path that cut a perilous ascent to the fringe of the primordial forest above. It was the man who led, and Keeko had no desire that it should be otherwise.

In a few minutes they were standing beside the fallen tree-trunk where Marcel had first gazed down upon the scant encampment over which his sovereignty was now absolute. He drew a deep breath as he gazed again upon that first scene of the new life that had come to him.

"Gee!" he said, "I'm kind of glad."

"Glad?"

Keeko was regarding him amusedly. In those first three days of their life together, in her woman's way, she had been studying him. And that which she had learned filled her with a tender, almost motherly amusement. He was transparent in his simplicity. His singleness of purpose was almost amazing. But under it all she had become aware of a strength and latent force that could only be guessed at. Their talks had been less intimate during the time of their preparations, and she understood that it was the result of the purpose that pre-occupied him. Now she speculated as to that which was in his mind. What was the boyish whim that had brought them to the place he had selected as their tryst? What was it that had made him express such gladness?

"I was thinking of that darn old moose," Marcel explained with eyes alight and whimsical.

The girl waited and he went on.

"Say, I guess life's a pretty queer thing," he observed profoundly. "It's a mighty small piece between content and discontent, isn't it? It's so small you'd think anyone of sense could fix it so we couldn't be discontented —ever. Yet we either can't or won't fix it. One leads to good and the other leads to bad—and only time can say how bad. I was getting mighty near discontent. Why? Because I'd got most everything I wanted except the things—I wanted." He laughed. "I was crazy for something, and I didn't quite know what. There was something in me crying out, hollering help, and I couldn't hand that help. Well, I guess there isn't a sound like that going on in me now. I'm just crazy with content."

"Why?"

The girl's question was instant, but, in a moment, she regretted it.

The man's eyes regarded her steadily for a moment, and Keeko hastily turned away. Promptly the echoes of the canyon were awakened by the youth's laughter.

"I couldn't just tell you—easy," he cried. "But I'm about as content as a basking seal. That's all. It's easier telling you how I feel glad thinking of that old moose. Oh, yes, that's easy. I owe him a debt I can't repay easy, seeing he's dead. Still, I feel like doing the best I know to make him feel good about things."

Marcel's mood infected the girl.

"You're—you're not reckoning to start in and—bury him?" she cried.

Marcel shook his head.

"There's only his bones left. The rest of him is chasing around in the bellies of a pack of timber wolves. No. It's his head and his antlers. The wolves have cleaned

his head sheer to the bone, as I reckoned they would, and I've toted their leavings right here, and I guess we're going to set it up a monument. Say, Keeko," he went on, with real seriousness, "I couldn't quit this camp here without setting up a monument. Do you know why?"

Keeko sat herself on the old tree-trunk. She made no reply. She simply waited for whatever he had to say.

"It's to commemorate something," he went on quickly, gazing out over the canyon. "I've found something I've been looking for—years. And I just didn't know I was looking for it. Well, that old moose found it for me. So I'm going to set his skull up, with his proud antlers atop of it, in the best and highest place I can set it, so his old dead eye sockets can just look out over the territory he reigned over till Fate reckoned it was time to set a human queen reigning in his stead. I don't guess he'll worry about things. He'll just feel proud that it wasn't a feller of his own sex ever beat him, and, if I know a thing, he'll feel sort of content and pleased watching over things for us."

The whim of the man, intended to be so light, was full of real feeling. Keeko was torn between tears and laughter. In the end she trusted herself only to a simple question.

"Where are you going to fix him up?" she demanded.

The spell was broken. Marcel promptly became the man of action. He pointed at the gnarled and broken head of a stunted tree growing at the very edge of the canyon, with its battered crest reaching out at a perilous angle over the abyss.

"At the head of that," he said, "so he can watch for your coming up out of the south, and—tell me about it."

"But——!"

A sickening apprehension had seized upon Keeko as she contemplated the overhang of the tree. It was al-

most at right angles to the face of the cliff. It projected out nearly thirty feet, and below— Her woman's heart could not repress a shudder at the thought of the three hundred feet drop to the rocky shoals in the waters below.

"You don't mean that?" she demanded a little desperately.

Marcel nodded.

"It's plumb easy."

There was no showiness, no bravado. Marcel had no thought to dazzle the girl. His purpose was a simple, boyish act.

He moved off into the forest while Keeko looked after him. From her heart she could have begged him to abandon, or modify his plan. But she refrained, and, somehow, sick at the thought of his purpose, she still realized a thrill at the object of it all. She looked at the roots of the overhanging tree and shuddered. They were partly torn out of the ground.

Marcel returned with his trophy. It was a burden of no mean weight. And Keeko's recognition of the fact only added to her fears.

"How—?" she began. But her question remained unasked.

"It's a cinch," Marcel cried. "Don't worry a thing. See those?" He pointed at two thongs of plaited rawhide, each secured to one of the horns. "Guess I'll tie them into a sling about the old trunk, and move the poor feller's head up as I get out, leaving it hanging below. Then, when I get to the end, I'll just haul it up, and fix it in its place. I've got it all figured."

Keeko nodded.

"I can help you fix the slings," she said eagerly.

"Sure."

The approval had its effect. Keeko set her teeth, and beat down her panic.

The minutes stretched out into the better part of half an hour before the sling was successfully adjusted about the tree-trunk. But at last Marcel stood up from his task and regarded the moose head swinging just beyond the face of the cliff. Then he followed Keeko's gaze, which was in the direction of the upstanding roots of the tree where they had been partially torn from their hold in the ground. It was only for a moment, however. He had no misgivings. Forthwith he divested himself of his pea-jacket and stood ready for the final task.

"What—what can I do now?"

Keeko's voice refused that steadiness which was its wont, and Marcel laughed.

"Do? Why just sit around and act audience while I do the balancing act. Guess that old moose is yearning for his place out there. He didn't figure on the honour, but—he's earned it."

And, despite her fears Keeko smiled at the boyishness of it all.

In a moment her breath was drawn sharply. Marcel was out on the log. He had passed from the cliff edge and was sitting astride of the trunk with his feet and calves gripping tight about it like a horseman on a bucking broncho. His progress was rapid. He lifted the sling and set it out at the full reach of his powerful arms, and then drew himself out after it.

Keeko watched. She watched with wide, apprehensive eyes. It was a fear quite new to her. A vivid imagination possessed her. She saw the great body of this man lying crushed and broken upon the rocks below, and the terror of it left her with nerves and muscles straining. She did not pause to consider the reason of her fears. She knew it, and acknowledged it to herself. In the battle of life which she had been forced to fight a champion had suddenly appeared. A champion such as she

had sometimes dreamed of. And with perfect trust and simple faith she had yielded her soul to him.

Foot by foot Marcel moved out, always thrusting his trophy ahead of him. There was a growing vibration in the leaning tree. It laboured under his weight. He pressed on, his whole mind and purpose concentrated. Keeko watched the roots for a sign of the strain. There was none. She glanced out at the distance he yet had to go. And the length of it prompted a warning cry she dared not utter. Farther and farther he passed on. Then came a pause that suggested uncertainty.

Keeko's heart leapt. Was he dizzy? Had he suddenly become aware of the perilous depth below him? Was his nerve——?

The moment passed. He was moving on again. The far off head of the tree was coming nearer, but the vibration had increased with his movements. Would the roots hold? Could they be expected to with the balance so heavily against them? Keeko could look no longer, and, in the agony of the moment, she seized hold of the upstanding roots and clung to them in a ridiculously impotent frenzy of hope that the weight of her own light body might help him.

The vibrations of the tree ceased and Keeko raised her terrified eyes for the meaning.

A wave of partial relief swept over her. Marcel had reached his goal. He had swung up the great moose head to set it in position. It was a breathless moment. She understood that his greatest difficulties had begun, and again she withdrew her gaze. But she clung to the roots of the tree, desperately determined that if the tree fell it should drag her to the disaster waiting upon him.

The suspense seemed endless. But at last there was renewed vibration in the tree. Keeko raised her eyes again. Marcel was moving backwards, and there, right

at the broken head of the tree, the fleshless skull with its magnificent antlers was set up in its place.

The girl was still clinging to the upstanding roots when Marcel leapt from his seat on the trunk and stood confronting her. His quick, smiling eyes took in the meaning of the situation at once. He reached out and removed the hands from their task, and, in doing so, he retained them longer than was necessary.

"You guessed you could hold that up if it—fell?" he asked.

And Keeko's reply was full of confusion.

"I didn't think," she stammered. "I didn't know what to do. It was shaking, and I thought—I thought——"

"You didn't want me to get smashed on the rocks below. Well—say—!" Marcel turned abruptly and pointed at the splendid antlers. "There he is," he laughed. "Isn't he a dandy? You could see him miles. And he's feeling good. He just told me that before I quit him. And he said he'd stop right there and see no harm came along your way. So I patted his darn old head, and told him I'd come along each year and see the rawhide was sound, and, if necessary, I'd fix him up again. Well?"

Keeko's fears had passed like a summer storm and the sun of her smile had returned again to her eyes.

"I'm just glad," she said. Then she became serious. "Say, do you believe in omens?" She was gazing out at the great antlers. "I don't guess you do. Only Indians worry with omens. Not folks of sense. Still, I kind of fancy that feller set up that way is our omen. He's going to hand us good luck in plenty. We'll get a great 'catch' where we're going, and we'll get back—safe. Do you think that?"

"Sure. Guess I think a heap more than that, though."

Marcel's smile was good to see. "That's not the limit of our luck," he went on. "Not by a lot. Say, I was raised by a feller who handed me a whole heap of wisdom. Guess there's more wisdom in him than ever I could get a grip on. He always guessed that luck was real in the folk who understood that way. He said a feller made his luck by faith. The darn fool who squealed because things went wrong queered his own luck, and just chased it out of sight. Get a notion and hammer it through so long as you've a breath in your body, and, if you act that way, luck'll pour itself all over you till you're kind of floating around on a sea of desire fulfilled. That's been his way, and I reckon it's good. I'm out to act as he said, so I don't reckon that hollow-eyed feller out there is the whole meaning of things. I've got all my notions and I'm going to push 'em plumb through."

Keeko nodded.

"That's the grit a man needs," she said. "Maybe a woman does, too, only—she's kind of different."

"Is she?" Marcel shook his head, and his eyes were full of a boyish humour. "She isn't—when it comes to grit. Say, there's only one woman I know except you, and those poor folks you see in Seal Bay, who—who don't know better. But that other woman and you have taught me things about grit most fellers don't ever learn. Most all the time a feller who's built strong can fight to the limit of his muscles. A gal isn't born with muscles worth speaking about, and she spends her life mostly fighting beyond the limit. Say, she's born to troubles and worries all the time. And she mostly gets through all the time. Why? Grit! She doesn't just care a darn. She's going to get through—and she does. Say, let's get along down and leave that wall-eyed old figure-head keeping guard. Come on."

CHAPTER IX

THE CLOSE OF THE SEASON

FOR days the journey continued through the ever deepening gorge. The stern grey walls remained unbroken, except for occasional sentry trees which had survived the years of storm and flood. Carpets of Arctic lichen sometimes clothed their nakedness, and even wide wastes of noisome fungus. But these things had no power to depress Marcel and Keeko; the Indians, too, passed them all unheeded. They were concerned alone with the perils of the waters which were often almost overwhelming.

The journey northward was one continuous struggle by day, and the daylit night was passed in the profound slumbers of exhausted bodies, with the canoes beached on some low foreshore dank with an atmosphere of hideous decay.

For Keeko and the Indians it seemed as if the land was rising ever higher and higher, and the endless waterway was cutting its course deeper and deeper into the bowels of the earth. But there was no question. Marcel was piloting them to a hunting ground of his own, and this passage was the highway to it.

Only once did Keeko protest. It was a protest that was natural enough. But Marcel swept it aside without scruple.

"I call this 'Hell's Gate,'" he said, with a ready laugh.

"Sounds rotten? But I always figger you need to pass through 'some' hell to make Paradise. We're in a mighty big country, and a-top of us are hundreds, and maybe thousands, of miles of forests that never heard tell of man. Wait. There's a break soon, just beyond the big rapids. That's where these darn old walls of rock fade right out, and make way for a lake that's like a sea."

It was his undisturbed confidence that broke the constant threat of imagination. This north country was Marcel's home. He knew no other. So they drove on, and on, to the goal that he had set.

The great rapids came at them as he had promised. And, in turn, they were passed on that narrow margin which is the line drawn between safety and destruction. Then came the mouth of the gorge, and the stretch of open river where it debouched upon the "lake that was like a sea."

For Keeko it was all like some wonderful dream with Marcel the magician who inspired it.

Two days later they had landed in a country whose relation to that which Keeko knew was only in the swarming flies and mosquitoes, and the keen air, which, even in the height of the open season, warned her of the terrors which must reign when the aurora lit the night of winter.

"Guess this is Paradise," Marcel explained, in answer to Keeko's expressed delight at the wide openness of it all, and at the sight of the sparse, lean Arctic grass which replaced the monotony of the shadowed river. "Guess it's a matter of contrasts," he went on. "It's kind of light, I guess, and it makes you think it's green. There's bush, or scrub, and bluffs of timber. But there's other things. It's mostly a sort of tundra and muskeg. There's more flies to the square inch than you'd reckon

there's room for. But it's the home of the silver fox that's never been hunted."

His words were lost upon the girl. Her whole attention had become absorbed with her first glance out across the lake. She was staring at a range of tremendous hills far away to the north-east, and her wonder-lit eyes were held by a strange phenomenon that filled the sky.

It was a blaze of ruddy light tinting a world of frothing cloud. To her it looked like a stormy oasis in the steely blue of an almost cloudless sky. It might have been the splendid light of an angry sunset, only that the sun was shining directly behind her. She pointed at it.

"That!" she cried, in a startled, hushed voice. "What's that?"

Marcel regarded the scene for some silent moments. It was a spectacle that stirred him. He was closer to Nature than he knew. The primitive was deeply rooted in him for all the pains at which Uncle Steve had been to widen his outlook through the learning which his dead father had left behind. Here was a caldron of fire playing its reflection upon a tumult of cloud. The cloud itself stood unaccounted in a perfect sky.

But the answer came readily. Marcel knew those streaks of red and gold, those rosy tints in contrast against the threatening cloud. They were the lights of Unaga. The lights from the Heart of Unaga, the dread Heart that haunted the Indian mind, and the secret of which Uncle Steve had so recently disclosed to him.

What could he say to this girl to whom he could not lie?

Doubt and hesitancy passed. These things could not long exist in a nature such as his.

"Guess I haven't seen it ever like that before," he said. Then he corrected himself. "Not in my recollection. But I know what it is. That's the Heart of

Unaga. It's a heart always afire. It's real red-hot fire that no man's ever had the nerve to get near. The Eskimo know it. And it scares them to death. They sort of reckon it's the world where the devil reigns. The hell that some folks reckon is real, and hot—and—hellish. But the feller that banks on learning and isn't worried by superstition'll just hand you the plain truth. It's a volcano, a real, live volcano which they reckon is the heart of Unaga."

The awe in Keeko's eyes only deepened.

"It's—it's just amazing," she cried. Then she added with a deep breath, "It's—dreadful."

. . . . . .

From the moment of their landing on the shores of the lake Marcel and Keeko became absorbed in the work that had brought them thither.

The wonder of the fiery Heart of Unaga swiftly passed, and only in the brief moments over the camp-fire its fascination claimed them. At such moments neither was quite free from the superstition they derided. For Keeko it was a mystery of the unknown. For Marcel it was, perhaps, the key to the whole life effort of the man who was his second father.

But the fur hunt was theirs, and with this no mystery of Unaga was permitted to interfere. Marcel was determined on a result such as he had never desired before. He dreamed of silver fox, he thought of silver fox. Silver and black fox had become the sole purpose of his life.

So they beat this great, wide, half-created valley with trap and gun. They beat it up with all the skill of a life of experience, and reward came plentifully. It came rapidly, too. Sometimes it was almost overwhelming.

It was a land teeming with game of every description

known to the regions north of 60°. The neighbourhood of the lake was alive with feather. Geese swarmed in their thousands, and there were moments when the sky was black with their legions. Duck, too, of every description had winged up from the south to the virgin waters of the North as Nature reluctantly released these hunting-grounds from the bonds of winter. Beaver and musk-ox, caribou and blacktail, reindeer and all the legions of lesser furs abounded. Thus, in consequence, it was the normal hunting-ground of the pariah of the beast world. Fox swarmed to the feast that was spread out. And it was the fox alone that needed to fear the coming of the fur hunter.

The slaughter of fox was immense, but selection was discriminate. Only the silver or black were troubled about, and these were collected with a care and skill that ensured the perfection of the pelts. Marcel was better than his word. He lived on the trail, and the Indians were given no rest. Keeko, borne on the uplift of success, knew no weariness when the effort promised treasure. They were working against time. Each of them knew it. And Marcel had the whole season mapped out almost to the hour.

So the days drew out into weeks, and the sun dropped lower and lower towards the horizon. Steadily the nights grew longer, and the working hours less. With each passing day the store of perfect pelts mounted. They were pegged out and dried, and set ready for storing at the moment the frost should bite through the air and hold them imperishable against their journey down to Keeko's home.

Life was almost uneventful in the monotony of success. Rains came, and gales blew down off the distant hills to the north-east. There were times when the great lake justified Marcel's description of it. It raged like a storm-

swept sea, and white capped waves broke upon its bosom. But with the passing of the storm and the flattening influence of the rain, or under the breaking forth of the chilly Northern sunshine, peace was restored, and the calm looked never to have been broken.

But for all the vagaries of climate, for all the unvarying nature of their labours, there was no monotony in the hearts of Marcel and Keeko. With every passing hour they came nearer and nearer to each other. The youth in them was driving them to that splendid ultimate, which is the horizon of all things between man and woman. There were no doubts. And their only fear was the nearing of that dreaded day when parting must come, and each would be forced to pursue the journey alone.

The parting was in the back of their minds almost from the moment of their arrival at the valley of the lake. Each day that passed was marked off in Keeko's mind. It was always one step nearer to the time when she would be forced to bid farewell to the glad light of Marcel's happy eyes, and the sound of his deep-toned, cheerful voice.

She knew. She had known it from those first happy days of their preparations for this northward adventure. And she admitted it without shame. She had learned to love the boy with a depth and strength she had never thought to yield to any man.

Love? It had seemed so far removed from her life, and from those with whom her life had been associated. She had thought a thousand times of those men with whom she had been brought into contact. And the very idea of love had only filled her with nausea. Her experience, from her step-father down to the loafing "sharps" of Seal Bay, had firmly planted in her mind the conviction that the men who haunted the shadows

north of 60° were only creatures whose quality of soul dared not display itself in the sunlight of truth and honesty.

Yet here, here where the world's dark secrets were more deeply hidden than anywhere else, even with Marcel's simple confession of a hidden purpose, secret movements, she had found a man before whom her woman's heart had at once prostrated itself.

It was amazing even to her. She found no explanation even in her moments of heart searching. More than that she had no desire to explain or excuse. The wonderful dream of life had come true. She had yielded unbidden, and nothing she could think of in life could undo the work that had been accomplished almost in the first moments of their meeting.

So it was she watched the store of pelts mount up, she watched the growing laze of the sun as it rose less and less above the horizon, and she noted with dread the steady lengthening of the brief summer night. Soon, far too soon, must come that parting which would rob her life of the light which had so suddenly broken through its shadows.

And Marcel was no less troubled. But his nature refused to admit the end which Keeko saw ahead. His was a splendid optimism that refused defeat. He had the tryst he had established in his mind. And far back behind his ingenuous eyes the purpose lurked that should necessity arise he would cut every tie that bound his life, no matter at what cost, and pursue to its logical end the wonderful dream that had been vouchsafed to him.

With determination such as this Marcel delayed the start of the return journey to the last possible moment. And Keeko set no obstacle in the way. She asked no margin of time for accident by the way. She was prepared to accept all chances. The last moments before

the permanent freeze up must see her back at her home. For the rest this wild, uncouth land was a radiant garden of delight to her.

But time waits no more for lovers than it waits for those whose hope is dying with the years. In the Northern wilderness time must be calculated almost to the second, and so the limit of safety was reached in a dalliance that had nothing to do with the necessities of their trade. The moment had come when the return must begin, or the disaster of winter would terminate for ever their youthful dream. The night frosts had done their work upon the pelts. The day was no longer sufficiently warm to seriously undo it. So the canoes floated laden at their moorings as Keeko had dreamed they would, and the last night on the shores of the lake was already closing down.

The camp-fire of driftwood and peat was glowing ruddily. The Indians were already deep within their fur-lined bags, and slumbering with the utter indifference engendered of complete weariness of body. Marcel and Keeko were squatting beside each other over the cheering warmth which kept the night chills at bay. Marcel was smoking. Keeko had no such comfort.

"I'd say Lorson Harris'll need to hand you something a heap better than five thousand dollars," Marcel observed with a laugh of genuine satisfaction and without turning from his contemplation of the fire. "Where'll you keep it so——?"

Keeko looked up with a start. Her thoughts had been far removed from the profit of her trade.

"At the bank at Seal Bay," she said hastily, lest her abstraction should be noticed.

"You keep it all—there?"

"No." Keeko shook her head. "But I'll have to—this. It's just too big. I'd be scared to carry it with me."

Marcel laughed again.

"That 'scare' again," he said. Then he turned, and for a moment gazed at the perfect profile which showed up against the growing dusk. "Say, you make me laff. Scare? You don't know what it means."

Keeko's eyes lit responsively as she turned and looked into his strong, fire-lit face.

"Not now," she said quietly. "When I'm down there alone it's—different."

"Alone?" Marcel removed his pipe from between his strong teeth. Then he nodded. "Yes," he agreed, "maybe it's different then."

Just for a moment the impulse was strong in him to fling all responsibility to the winds. He wanted to crush her in his great arms and tell her all those things which life ordains that woman shall yearn to hear. But the impulse was resisted. He knew it had to be.

"But you don't ever need to be alone again," he said simply. "You're forgetting. There's that darn old moose. That's a sign. You've only to send word, or come right along up. You see, the folks who're alone are the folks who've got no one to go to when things get awry. I guess you can't ever feel just alone now—whatever happens."

Keeko's eyes were very soft, very tender as she looked up into Marcel's face.

"It's good to hear that. It's good to feel that," she said gently. "And I do feel it," she added with a deep sigh. "I've a whole heap to thank God for, and, if it's not wrong to put it that way, still more to thank you for. I just don't know how to say it all. But just as long as I live I——"

"Cut it right out, Keeko. Cut it right out."

Marcel spoke hastily. He spoke almost roughly. He was in no frame of mind to listen complacently to any

words of thanks from this girl. Thanks? If thanks were due it was from him. She had given him her trust and confidence. She had given him moments in his life such as he had never dreamed could fall to the lot of any man. In the firelight he flushed deeply at the thought, and again impulse stirred and nearly overwhelmed him.

"I just can't stand thanks from you, Keeko," he said impulsively. "Thanks only need to come from folks whom you help feeling you don't fancy doing it. You've handed me the sort of happiness that makes a feller feel like getting onto his hands and knees and thanking God for. Say, I can't talk to you same as I fancy to, and I guess it's not my fault. You don't know who I am, or a thing about me. And you can't hand me much more about yourself. Still, I sort of feel the time'll come when we can open out things. What I want to say is, you've handed me a trust that isn't hardly natural. You've chased this country with a feller who might be any old thing from a 'hold-up' to a 'gun-artist,' and they're around in plenty north of 60°. And it's the big white heart inside you made you act that way, and I sort of feel that big white heart is still my care, even after we've made good-bye at that old moose head. I wish to death I could say the things I fancy right, but I just can't, and it's no use in talking. But don't you ever dare to hand me thanks, or I'll have to get right up and break things."

Keeko's reply was a low thrilling laugh, full of a gentle gladness which she cared not if he read.

"Maybe you haven't said the things the way you fancy saying them," she said, in her gentle fashion. "But you've said them the way I'd have you say them. But you're right. There's folks in a person's life you can't thank, you haven't a right to thank, and maybe that's how we're fixed. You've jumped right into my

life with your big body and generous heart, and I—well, I guess you haven't found things easier because I've butted into yours. Still, the thing's happened, and it makes me kind of glad. Some day— But there—what's the use?"

The temptation was irresistible. Marcel flung out one great hand and closed it over the hands the girl was holding out to the fire.

"That's it," he said hoarsely, while his body thrilled at the girl's warm clasp in his. "What's the use? Neither you nor I can say the things we feel. That's so. There's a great big God of this Northland looking on and fixing things the way He sees. As you say 'Some day'! Meanwhile there's the start back to-morrow morning. Just get right along and sleep, and dream good, and be sure you're aren't alone in the world—ever again."

CHAPTER X

THE FAREWELL

A BURDEN of grey hung depressingly over the world. A bleak north wind came down the river gorge. The sun's power had weakened before the advance of the Arctic night. Beaten, dismayed, it lived only just above the skyline.

The sightless sockets of the old moose stared wide-eyed down the river. They were fulfilling the task that had been set them. The howling of the gale, the polar cold, the blinding storm of snow; these things would have no power to turn them from their vigil. The wide-antlered, bleaching skull was the guardian of the tryst, and its sole concern was its watch and ward.

The chill and cheerlessness of it all was reaching at the hearts of the boy and girl who were at the moment of parting. Marcel was silently whittling a stout twig of tamarack, whose toughness threatened to dull the keen edge of his sheath-knife. Keeko was standing a few feet from him, within a yard or so of the precipice which dropped sheer to the waters below. Her eyes were following the direction of the gaze of the old moose, and the picture her mind was dwelling upon was far removed from what she beheld.

It was of the long, lonesome winter, with her mother dying by inches, while she, herself, spent her days in the avoidance of her step-father whom she had learned to fear

as well as to hate. Marcel had no such bitterness to look out upon. But he was none the less weighted down that the farewell must be spoken.

The hot blood of youth was surging through his veins. Manhood's reckless passion was beating in heart and brain. A desperate desire to yield to the call of Nature was urging him mercilessly. Yet, through it all, he knew that the farewell must be said now, for both their sakes, for the sake of honour, of loyalty, for the sake of Love itself.

Oh, yes. He knew how easy it would be to sweep along on the tide of passion. But he loved Keeko. Loved her with all his simple heart and body, and his love was bound up with an honour which he had no power to outrage.

Time and again in the madness of the moment he thought to urge Keeko to abandon all and return with him to the home which he knew would hold nothing but welcome for her. He thought of all that happiness which might be hers in the kindly associations of Uncle Steve and An-ina. He thought of all the wretchednesses of soul he would save her from, the dread of that step-father, whom she had declared to be a murderer at heart. Then he remembered the dying mother whose one care was the child of her heart, and he realized that his own desire must not be. The farewell must be taken now.

Once he thought to continue the journey with her to help her complete her final task of trading her pelts. But he remembered in time, and thrust temptation from him. There was An-ina demanding his protection in Uncle Steve's absence during the winter. There was his pledge to that man who never questioned his given word.

Looking up his ardent gaze rested on the figure poised so near the brink of the gorge.

"Keeko!"

His voice was deep with feeling. Its tone was imperative, too.

"Yes—Marcel?"

Keeko's reply was low-voiced and almost humble. She felt his gaze even before he spoke. Had she not intercepted it a hundred times in their work together? Oh, yes. She knew it. And that which she had seen, and read, had been the answer she most desired to all the yearnings of her woman's heart. Now she knew that the moment she most dreaded had come at last. And she wondered and feared as she had never feared in her life before.

Marcel drove his knife deeply in a diagonal cut into the hard wood of the tamarack.

"You've a month to the freeze up," he said. "It's the limit you need. I've figgered it. I've talked it out with Little One Man."

"Yes. I can make home in a month."

Keeko drew a sharp breath. She could make home. Never in her life had she felt as she felt now. Home!

Marcel ripped his knife in an opposite diagonal on the reverse of the wood. The force he applied seemed almost vicious.

"Are—you glad?"

"I—s'pose so."

"You—s'pose so? Of course you are. There's your poor sick mother."

"Yes."

The girl's reply was almost inaudible. Marcel wrenched the wood in half with his powerful hands. It snapped, and he examined the pronged ends critically.

With an effort Keeko bestirred herself from her despondency.

"Yes," she cried desperately. "I must get home. I want to. I love my mother, Marcel. She's suffered.

Oh, how she suffers. Yet through it all she thinks only of me. She schemes and hopes only for me. Maybe I can't hope to save her life, but I can tell her the things that'll let her die almost happy. It's the best I can do, and I—I'm glad to do it."

Marcel nodded over his two pieces of wood.

"That's how I feel about it," he said. "It seems to me we haven't any sort of right to set up the things that 'ud please us against the happiness of those who've been good to us. I'd thought of beating down this river with you, to see things through for you. Then I remembered a sort of mother woman who looks to me for the help of a son. Then I thought of asking you to cut the home with a step-father, who's a murderer at heart, and come along where you'd find only love and friendship. Then I remembered your sick mother. I'm guessing the self of things is mighty big, but there's something bigger. Still— Say, come and sit right here!"

He was smiling. But his eyes were full of a deep tenderness.

Keeko obeyed. She had no desire to deny him. He seemed to have robbed her of all will of her own. His will had become wholly her desire. She took her seat on the tree-trunk, just removed from his side by a rift in the great log which was hidden under a growth of lichen.

Marcel's eyes sought hers. But she had turned from him. She was gazing out at the moose head set up over the gorge.

"How am I to hear if you're needing my help?" he demanded. "I can't make here till the first break of spring. There's just one hell of a long winter before that."

Marcel was endeavouring to smother his feeling. Keeko shook her head. Had she not thought and thought over this very thing?

"I won't need help," she said. "Not now. You've helped me through my only worry. If mother lives things'll just go on the same. If—she doesn't? She and I—we got it fixed. I hit right out for myself as we've planned it—that's all."

But the hot blood had mounted to Marcel's head.

"It's not!" he cried with startling force. "D'you think you're going out of my life that way? You?" Suddenly he broke into a laugh that echoed down the gorge. He pointed out at the moose head. "Look at the old feller," he cried. "He's winking his old eyes and flapping the comic ears he hasn't got. I swear if you could only hear it he's busting his sides laffing at the joke of you reckoning to cut yourself out of my life that way. No, sir! I'm coming right along here at the first break of spring, and if I don't find you around, or a sign from you, I'm beating up this river to look for you, if I have to chase it sheer up to its source. Say, you can't hide yourself in a corner of this darnation territory I won't find you in. And I guess I'm just as obstinate as a she-wolf chasing a feed of human meat. It can't be done, Keeko. Not now. I tell you it can't be done."

The man's force was no less for all his smiling eyes. And Keeko made no pretence.

"But why?" she cried, with a gesture of her hands that made him desire to imprison them. "Why should you worry? You've helped me to the things that'll leave me free of—everything. I haven't a right. I haven't any sort of right to take you from your folks, and from those things it's your work to do for them. Besides, who said I figgered to cut myself out of your life?" She smiled up into his eyes with an almost child-like confidence. "I don't want to. I—I hadn't a thought that way. Say, if I thought I'd never see you again I'd feel like nothing in the world ever could matter. The thing

I'm guessing to make plain is when we quit here you don't need to worry a thing. I'll get through, and next spring I'll come right along up and tell you how I'm fixed."

Marcel sat up, and, reaching out, caught and imprisoned the hands he desired.

"You'll do that?" he cried, while he drew her round so that she faced him. "Sure? Sure you mean that? You'll come right along up here with the break of winter, and we'll——"

"I certainly will."

Keeko's youth was no less than Marcel's. Her eyes were without any shyness. She looked into his fearlessly, and read without shame all that they expressed. She was glad. Her heart was full of a delight of which even parting could not rob her. The memory of that which she beheld now would be hers during the long, drear months of winter, a sheet anchor of hope, of joy, something to tell her always that, whatever might chance, life still held for her a priceless treasure of which it could never wholly rob her.

Marcel released her hands lingeringly.

"Here," he cried holding up the pieces of tamarack he had cut. "These darned bits of wood." Then he raised the lichen, which had been carefully loosened, and revealed the gaping rift in the tree-trunk beneath it. "Our cache," he added. "Say, maybe when spring breaks there's things might make it so you can't get along up here. You see, it's a chance. You can't just say. Maybe I'm scared. Anyway, I got a notion you might need me in a hurry. I'm scared for you. That's it. I'm scared for you. Well? You've got your boys. Either of 'em could make this place in the winter. Here, grab this little old stick. I'll keep the other. It's just a token. I've set your name on it. Well, send it along

up, and cache it in this cache, and when I come along and find it here, instead of you, at the break of spring, I'll know you're held up and need me, and you can gamble your big white soul I'll beat the trail to your help like a cyclone in a hurry. Oh, I know. You'll guess nothing can happen that way. But it's just my notion, and you're going to kind of humour me. Git that? When I find that token set in this cache I'll make up the river just as hard as hell'll let me."

In spite of her confidence Keeko accepted the stick the boy passed to her and sat gazing at it. It was then that she discovered the lettering that had been cut on it. There were just two words in letters crudely formed: "LITTLE KEEKO."

For a while her eyes dwelt upon them absorbing all the tenderness they conveyed. Then, in a moment, all the truth in her, the woman, roused into active purpose. She handed it back to him.

"You've given me the wrong token," she said, with a laugh. "I need one with your name on it."

She held out her hand and Marcel passed her the other half of the stick. It was inscribed with the single word: "MARCEL." Instantly the girl rose from her seat and moved away.

"We best get back to camp," she said.

It was her woman's defence. Another few moments and Keeko knew she would have been powerless before her own passionate emotion.

She led the way to the head of the path which went down to the little camp on the foreshore below.

. . . . . .

Marcel was standing beside the tree which had become the centre of all things for him. The grey night sky had remained. It had only deepened its threat with the

dawn. But the reality of the moment was nothing to the desolate winter that had settled upon his heart.

The farewell lay behind him. He was alone, desperately alone, in a world where he had never realized loneliness before. And there, far out down on the broad bosom of the river, were the canoes carrying with them his every hope, his every desire.

The bitterness, the depression robbed him of all the buoyant manhood that was his. Keeko had gone. Keeko. Keeko with her wonderful eyes, and the grace and symmetry of a youthful goddess. Yes, she had gone, and between them now lay that long winter night with all its manifold chances of disaster. With the break of spring he might look for her coming again. Yes, he might look for it. But would she come? He wondered. And again and again he cursed himself that he had listened to other than the promptings of his desire.

The canoes reached the bend of the river driven by paddles in hands that were wonderfully skilled. They were about to pass out of view behind the grey wall of stone which lined the waterway. The figure of the girl in the prow of the hindmost boat was blurred and indistinct. Marcel had eyes for nothing else. He raised his fur cap and waved it slowly to and fro. And as he waved he thought he detected a similar movement in the boat. He could not be sure at the distance. But he believed. He hoped it was so. He wanted it to be.

He turned away. The boats had passed the grey barrier. There was nothing left but to set out to rejoin his outfit, and return——

His wandering gaze had fallen on the tree-trunk which held such happy memories for him. He was gazing upon the lichen covering their cache. The lichen was sadly, recklessly disturbed. He knew he had not left it in that

condition. He was far too experienced, too old in the craft of the trail to leave a cache in such a state. He stepped over to it hurriedly, and raised the covering Nature had set. He peered down into the deep pocket beneath it.

The next moment a sharp exclamation broke from him. He plunged a hand into the pocket and drew out the token he had handed to Keeko over-night.

He stared at it. It was her demand for his help. She had placed it there—when? It must have been during the night. Why? What did she mean? Did she desire him to follow—now?

He turned it about in his big fingers, and in a moment discovered fresh characters cut roughly into the wood. It was a word prefixing the name which he had set there: "MY MARCEL."

"My Marcel!"

He was not dreaming. No—no! The little added word was there cut in by a hopelessly unskilled hand. But it was there, as plain as intent could make it. "My Marcel." It told him all—all that a man desires to know when a woman bares her heart to him. It was Keeko's farewell message that he was not intended to discover till the break of winter. It was her summons to him, not for mere help, but a summons to him telling him that her love was his.

He ran to the edge of the cliff. He searched the grey headland where the shadows had swallowed up the canoes. There remained nothing—nothing but the dull, cold prospect of the coming of winter—the relentless Arctic winter.

He stood there without sign or sound. He made no movement. But the heart of the man was shining in his eyes.

A shot rang out in the woods behind him. It was dis-

tant, but it split up the silence with a meaning that could not be denied.

Marcel turned. The light in his eyes had changed. They were shadowed as not even the parting had shadowed them. Oh, yes, he knew. It was a signal to him. His own men were searching for him. It warned him that winter was fast approaching, that merciless winter of Unaga, and these men, these Sleepers, were eager to return to the warm comfort of their quarters and their winter's sleep.

CHAPTER XI

THROUGH THE EYES OF A WOMAN

AN-INA smoothed her brown hand over the superfine surface of the spread of buckskin where it lay on the counter in the store. Her dark eyes were critically contemplating it, while she held ready a large pair of scissors.

A great contentment pervaded her life. It was in her wide, wise eyes now as she considered the piece of material which was to provide a shirt for Steve. The buckskin had been prepared by her own hands. It was soft, and tawny with the perfect tint she desired. It could not be too soft, or too good for Steve. That was her thought as she prepared to hew it into shape for the sewing and beading which no other hands would be permitted to work.

Her contemplation was broken by the abrupt flinging open of the door of the store. She turned quickly, expectantly, and the smiling content in her eyes, as they rested on the figure of Steve, left no doubt as to the welcome nature of the interruption.

"You mak' your plan?" she demanded.

The manner of her question was that of poignant interest. Her whole thought was centred on the life and well-being of this white man. For the moment the buckskin was forgotten.

Steve closed the door. He came over to the counter

behind which were piled the stores of his trade. He leant against it, and his steady eyes regarded the handsome, dusky woman, who had come to him at the moment of his life's disaster, and had been his strong comfort and support ever since.

"Yes." He nodded, in the decided fashion that was always his. "We can't wait."

"You go—before Marcel come?"

There was no surprise in the woman's reply.

"The outfit's ready. The dogs are hardened to the bone. Every day, I guess, is a day lost. The snow's thick on the ground and the waters are frozen up. Well? We can't guess the time it'll take us this trip. We can't spare an hour. If we get through it don't matter. If we fail we need to make back here before the 'Sleepers' crawl out from under their dope. If we wait for Marcel, and he don't get right along quick, it means losing time we can't ever make good. You get all that?"

The woman turned up the oil lamp. The day was dark for all the lolling sun in the horizon. She passed across to the stove, roaring comfortingly under its open draft. She closed the damper and stood over it with hands outstretched to the warmth. It was a favourite attitude of hers.

"An-ina know," she said. "An' Marcel? What it keep him so much long? All time he come before snow. Now? No. Why is it?"

A shadow of anxiety descended upon her placid face. A pucker drew her brows together. Her heart was troubled.

Steve shook his head. He showed no sign of sharing her concern.

"He'll be along," he said confidently. "I'm not worried a thing. I'd trust Marcel to beat the game more

than I would myself. You needn't to be scared. No. It's not that."

"What it—then?"

An-ina's eyes were full of a concern she had no desire to conceal. She had nothing to conceal from this man who was the god of her woman's life.

"I just can't say," Steve said. "But—I'm not worried. The thing is we'd fixed it that I didn't quit till Marcel got to home."

"Why?"

Steve shrugged, but his eyes were smiling.

"Oh, I guess we don't fancy leaving you without men folk around. It isn't that things are likely to worry any. But you see—you're all we've got. You're a sort of anchor that holds us fast to things. You see, I guess Marcel reckons you his mother, and I, why—it don't need me to say how I feel."

The look in the woman's dark eyes deepened. She knew the feelings prompting Steve. Oh, yes. She knew. And she thanked the God she had learned to believe in, and to worship, for the happiness which he had permitted her in the midst of the terrors of this desolate Northern country. Her answer came at once. It came full of her generosity.

"Ah," she cried quickly. "You think all this thing—you men! An' what An-ina think? Oh, An-ina think much. So much. Listen. She tell. Marcel him big feller. Him mak' summer trail. Far—far. An-ina not know. Him wolf all come around. Him river with much water—rapids—rocks. Him muskeg. Him everything bad, an' much danger. An-ina she not say, 'An-ina come too, so no harm come by Marcel.' She say, 'no.' Marcel big man. Marcel brave. Him fight big. So him God of white man kill Marcel all up, then An-ina heart all break, but she say it all His will. So

she not say nothing. Steve him go by Unaga, where all him devil men. They get him. They kill him. Then An-ina all mak' big weep—inside. She say nothing. She not say 'An-ina come, too, so she frighten all devil men away.' Oh, no. An-ina woman. She not scare any more as Steve an' Marcel. She sit by fire. She mak' Steve him shirt. She have gun, plenty. No man come. Oh, no. She not scare for nothing. An-ina brave woman, too. Steve, Marcel mak' her coward. Oh, no. Outfit ready—Julyman—Oolak—all him dogs. Yes. Steve him go—right away. Bimeby Marcel him come. So."

An-ina's voice was low and soft. But for all her halting use of the white man's tongue, with which she found so much difficulty, there was decision and earnestness in every word she uttered. There was the force, too, of a brave, clear-thinking mind in it. And it left Steve with difficulty in answering her. Besides for all his desire to protest, he knew he must go, or sacrifice that thing which had brought him to Unaga.

With characteristic decision he accepted her protest. He knew her generosity and courage. But a sense of shame was not lacking at the thought that the very position he had used to convince Marcel could not be allowed to stand where his purpose was threatened.

"I've got to go," he said almost doggedly. "But I hate the thought of leaving you, An-ina. If Marcel would only get around now, I'd feel easy. But there's not a sign of him. He's late—late and— Psha! It's no sort of use. I must pull out right away."

He stood up from the counter and came over to the stove. An-ina's dark eyes watched him. Even in her untutored mind she understood the strength of character which overrode his every scruple, his every sentiment. Her regard for him was something of idolatry, and deep in her soul she knew that the gleanings in his heart left

by that white woman were hers. Maybe they were only gleanings, but she asked no more. She was content. She knew no distinction between mistress and wife. The natural laws were sufficient. He was the joy of her savage heart, and she was the only woman in his life. It was as she would have it.

He came up to her and stood gazing down at the long, thin hands outspread to the warmth. Then with an unaccustomed display of feeling he thrust one arm through hers, and his strong hand clasped itself over both of hers.

"Say, An-ina, I'm going a hell of a long trail. It's so long we just can't figure the end. It's a winter trail northward, and I don't need to tell you a thing of what that means. I'd say anyone but you and Marcel would guess I'm crazy. Well, I'm not. But it's a mighty desperate chance we're taking. If we win through, and get what we're chasing, it means the end of this country for all of us. Maybe you'll be glad. I don't know. If we fail—well, I can't just figure on failure. I never have and I don't reckon to start that way now. But I got to hand you 'good-bye' this time. It's not that way with us usually. But this time I sort of feel I want to. You're just a great woman, and you've been mostly the whole meaning of things to me since—since— Anyway, I've done the best I know to hand you all the happiness lying around in a territory there's nothing much to in that way. But all that's nothing to what you've been to me. Well, my dear, I don't guess it's our way talking these things, but I got that inside me makes me want to say a whole heap about how I feel and what I think. Guess I'm not going to try though. It wouldn't amount to anything if I talked a day through. I wouldn't have said half I needed to. You and Marcel are all I've got, and you two dear folk'll be the last thought I have in life.

You'll help him, my dear, won't you? You're just Marcel's mother, and if I don't get back you'll need to be his father, too. Good-bye."

An-ina made no reply. She had listened to him with a heart that was overflowing. As he said "good-bye" she turned her head, and the speechlessness of their farewell was deep with simple human passion.

A moment later they had moved apart. It was Steve's initiative.

"Now? You go—now?"

An-ina's voice was heroic in its steadiness. There was not a sign of tears in her shining eyes. She followed him to the door as though his going were an ordinary incident in their day's routine, and stood there, while he passed out, the very embodiment of that stoicism for which her race is so renowned.

. . . . . .

An-ina was alone. Only the skeleton of her life at the fort remained to keep her company. The flesh was shorn from the bone. That flesh which had made her life an existence of joy which the greatest terror of Unaga was powerless to rob her of. It is true there were a few of the trail dogs left behind, and some of the reindeer. But what were these half wild creatures in exchange for a human companionship in which her whole soul was bound up?

But An-ina was free of the vain imaginings which curse the lives of those who boast the culture of civilization. She was content in her woman's memory, in her looking forward, and the present was full of an hundred and one occupations which held her mind to the exclusion of everything but the contemplation of the coming joy of re-union.

She had claimed to herself a bravery equal to that of

her men folk. She might well have claimed more. She possessed, in addition to that active courage which belongs to the adventurer, the passive, courageous endurance of the woman. So, with an unruffled calm, she set about the daily "chores" that were hers, and added to them all those labours which were necessary that this outland home should lack nothing in its welcome to her men.

For the moment the world about her was still and silent. It was as though Nature remained suspended in doubt between the seasons. The open season was passed, when the earth lay bare to the lukewarm sun of summer. A white shroud covered the nakedness of the world, and already ice was spread out over the waters. But winter had not yet made its great onslaught.

It was coming. Oh, yes. It was near. The brief hours of daylight warned that. So did the mock-suns which hovered in the sky, chained by the radiant circle which held the dying sun prisoned. Then in the north the heavy clouds were gathering. They gathered and dispersed. Then they gathered again. And always they banked deeper and darker. The wind was rising. That fitful, patchy wind which is so full of threat, and which bears in its breath the cutting slash of a whip.

There were moments in her solitude when An-ina read these warnings with some misgivings. They were not for herself. They were not even for Steve. The winter trail was no new thing to her great man. Besides, he was equipped against anything the Northern winter could display. Accident alone could hurt him. That was her creed. Marcel was different. He was only equipped for summer, and he should have returned before that first snow-fall. How could his canoes make the waters of the river when they were already frozen?

Thus it was she speculated as each dawn she sought

the sign of his return, and at the close of each day, with the last of the vanishing light.

For a week she went on with her endless labours in that cheerful spirit of confidence which never seemed to fail her. Then there came a change. She sought the gates of the fort more often, and stood gazing out longer, and with eyes that were not quite easy. Her unease was growing. She spurned it, she refused to admit her fears. And, in her defence, she redoubled her labours.

Thus ten days from the moment of Steve's going passed. It was the evening of the tenth day.

With a desperate resolve she had refused to allow herself her last evening vigil. Snow was in the air and had already begun to fall. So she sat over the great stove in the store, and plied her needle, threaded with gut, upon the shirt that was some day to cover Steve's body. Not once did she look up. It was almost as if she dared not. She was fighting a little battle with herself in which hope and confidence were hard pressed.

It was in the midst of this that the door was thrust open wide, and, with the opening, a flurry of snow swept in upon the warm atmosphere. But that which caused her to start to her feet, and drop the treasured garment perilously near to the stove, was the figure that appeared in the white cloud that blew about it. It was Marcel, with snow and ice about his mouth and chin, and upon his eye-lashes, and with his thick pea-jacket changed from its faded hue to the virgin whiteness of the elements through which he had succeeded in battling his way.

"An-ina!"

It was the glad cry of greeting she had yearned for in the big voice of a man whose delight is unmeasured.

"Marcel!" The woman's reply was full of joy. Then, with a sigh that was a deep expression of relief: "An-ina glad—so glad!"

Marcel turned and closed the outer storm door. Then he shut the inner door securely. A moment later he was freeing himself from icicles and snow at the stove.

"Say, I had to beat it like hell," he declared with a great laugh, while An-ina gathered up her sewing and laid it aside. Her mother mind was running upon a hot supper for her boy. "I was just worried to death at you folks sitting around guessing. Winter got me beat by just two weeks, and now the snow's falling in lumps, and it's mighty near down to zero. Where's Uncle Steve?"

"Gone." An-ina had forgotten the supper. "Him gone where you know. Him gone days. Maybe ten. No wait. Oh, no. Him guess you come soon. So him go."

"And Julyman? And Oolak?"

"All gone. All him gone by land of fire. Oh, yes."

An-ina sighed. It was her only means of expressing the feelings she could not deny.

Marcel's eyes had sobered. He flung off his pea-jacket and possessed himself of An-ina's chair. He sat there with his great hands spread out to the warmth, enduring the sharp cold-aches it inspired. He was gazing steadily at the glowing patch where the side of the stove was red hot. His mind was busy with thoughts which robbed him of half the joy of his return.

The thought of supper returned to the woman.

"So. I mak' him supper," she said. "Him boys. They come too?"

"Oh, yes," Marcel laughed shortly "Guess they're back in the woods there, doping like hell so they shan't lose any sleep. They were kind of mad with me getting back late. I had to rawhide two of them, or the whole darn lot would have bolted. You see, I was held up."

An-ina would have questioned further but there was no encouragement in Marcel's tone or manner. He had

not turned to reply. His attitude was one the squaw recognized. He wanted to think. So she moved silently away and passed to the old kitchen to prepare his food.

Marcel sat on. He was thinking, thinking hard. But not in any direction that An-ina would have guessed. For once there was confusion of thought and feeling that was quite foreign to his nature. He was thinking of Keeko, he was thinking of Uncle Steve, and he was thinking of An-ina. He was angry with himself and as nearly angry with Uncle Steve as he could be. He cursed himself that through his delay An-ina should have been left alone for two weeks. He was troubled at the thought that Uncle Steve saw fit to leave her, and refused to await his return. And towards An-ina he felt that contrition which his deep regard for her made so poignant. But through all, above all, floated the spirit of Keeko, and he knew that whatever might have befallen nothing would have made him act differently. He was troubled to realize that for the first time in his life Uncle Steve and An-ina had only second place in his thought.

His reflections were broken by An-ina's quiet return.

"Supper—him all fixed. Marcel come?"

Marcel started up. And the shadows passed out of his handsome eyes. The gentle humility with which An-ina addressed him was irresistible. He was smiling again. His deep affection for this mother woman was shining in his eyes.

"Will I come?" he cried. "Say, you just see."

. . . . . .

Marcel had eaten his fill. He had been well-nigh famishing when he arrived, and the simple cooking and wholesome food that An-ina set before him was like a banquet compared to the fare of the trail, on which he had subsisted all the open season.

Now he was lounging back in the rawhide-seated chair with his pipe aglow. He was ready to talk, more than ready. And An-ina's soft eyes were observing him, and reading him in her own wise way.

"You tell me—now?" she said, in the fashion of one who knows the value of food to her men folk's mood.

Marcel nodded with a ready smile.

"Any old thing you fancy," he cried. "What'll I tell you? About the darn outfit, the pelts we got? The woods? The rivers? The skitters? The——"

An-ina shook her head. His mood was what she desired.

"No. Marcel say the thing that please him. An-ina listen."

Marcel laughed. He had come home with the treasure hugged tight to his bosom. He had promised himself that this was his secret, to be imparted to no one—not even to Uncle Steve. An-ina had demanded that he should speak as he desired, and he knew that his one desire was to talk of Keeko. Now, he asked himself, why—why, for all his resolve, should he withhold the story of this greatest of all joys from the woman who was his second mother?

His laugh was his yielding.

"Oh, yes," he cried impulsively. "I'll tell you the thing that pleases me. I'll tell you the reason I was held up. And—it's the greatest ever!"

An-ina rose quickly from her seat.

"You tell An-ina—sure. It long. Oh, yes. An-ina say this thing—'the greatest ever.'"

She was gone and had returned again before Marcel had dragged himself back from his contemplation of the things which he desired to talk of. It was a gentle hint from An-ina that roused him.

"Oh, yes? An-ina listen."

Marcel started. He stirred his great bulk, and re-lit the pipe he had failed to keep alight.

"I'd forgotten," he said, with another laugh that was not free from self-consciousness. "Say," he went on, "I've hit the greatest trail ever a feller struck in this queer darn country. Gee!" He breathed a profound sigh. "It was queer. I was trailing an old bull moose. I followed it days."

An-ina was watching him. She beheld the radiant light in his frank eyes. She noted the almost feverish manner in which he was clouding the tobacco smoke about him. She even thought she detected an unsteadiness in the hand that held his pipe. She waited.

"Oh, yes," he went on. "I was in a territory I guess I've hunted plenty. I kind of knew it all, as it's given to anyone to know this darn land. I followed the trail right up to the end, but—I didn't make a kill. No."

His tone had dropped to a soft, deep note that thrilled with some emotion An-ina had never before been aware of in him. A startled light shone in her eyes, and her work lay unheeded in her lap.

"No. I didn't make a kill, but I came right up to the end of that trail, and found——"

"A woman?"

Marcel sat up with a jolt. His wide, astonished eyes stared almost foolishly into the dark native eyes smiling back into his.

"How d'you know—that?" he demanded sharply.

He planted his elbows on the table, resting his square chin upon his hands.

An-ina laughed that almost silent laugh so peculiar to her.

"An-ina guess him. An-ina look and look. An-ina see Marcel all smiling—inside. She hear him voice all soft, like—like— Ah, An-ina not know what it like.

So she think. She say, what mak' Marcel all like this? Him find something. Him not scare. Oh, no. Marcel not scare nothing. No. Him much please. Marcel boy? No. Him big man. What him mak' big man much please. An-ina know. It woman. So she say."

Marcel wanted to laugh. He wanted to shout his delight. He wanted to pour out the hot, passionate feelings of his heart to a woman who could read and understand him like this. He did none of these things, however.

He simply smiled and nodded, while his whole face lit radiantly.

"That's a hell of a good guess," he cried. "Yes. I found a—woman. A beautiful, blue-eyed white woman. And she called herself, 'Keeko.'"

An-ina swiftly rolled up the buckskin she was working. She laid it on the supper table beside her. Then she drew up her chair, and she, too, set her elbows on the table, and supported her handsome, smiling face in her hands. Again it was the woman, the mother in her. It was her boy's romance. The boy she had raised to manhood with so much love and devotion. And she was thirsting, as only a mother can, for the story of it.

"So. Marcel him say. An-ina listen."

CHAPTER XII

KEEKO RETURNS HOME

KEEKO had beaten the winter where Marcel had failed. But then Keeko's journey had been southward towards the sun, where the forest sheltered, and the river pursued a deep-cut course to the westward of the great hills supporting the wind-swept plateau of Unaga.

For all these easier conditions, however, the journey was a hard beat up against the sluggish flow of the river. It permitted no relaxation, and only a minimum of rest. Then the portages up the rapids had been rendered doubly laborious by reason of cargoes such as the girl and her Indians had never been called upon to deal with before.

It should have been a happy enough journey. Was it not in the nature of a procession of great triumph? Had not Keeko's summer labours been crowned far beyond her dreams? Surely this was so. The ardent little feminine scheme, worked out on a sick bed, and executed with great strength and courage had been brought to a complete and successful issue. Oh, yes. The shadows which had threatened Keeko's future had been completely confounded. She knew beyond a doubt that she was independent, as her mother desired her to be. When the moment came she knew she was in the privileged position of being free to cut the bonds which had

hitherto held her to the man whose brutality was surely enough driving her suffering mother to the grave.

But depression weighed the girl down. Look forward as she might, hope would not rise at her bidding. Marcel had been snatched out of her life like a shadowy dream, and the future offered her little enough comfort. Then there was her mother, and all that might have happened at the post in her long absence.

It was in such a mood that she emerged into the horse-shoe loop of the river and beheld the dark walls of the old Fort Duggan. Her pretty face and serious eyes reflected her feelings as she piloted her boat towards the landing in the cold, crisp air of the brief daylight. Furthermore it was with no easing of her mood that she beheld the figure of her step-father on the landing awaiting her approach.

Just for a moment she wondered. Just for a moment she asked herself if he had had warning from some stray Shaunekuk of her coming. She realized a spasm of fear that perhaps prying eyes had witnessed her caching of the great bulk of her furs, that part which represented her own personal fortune. But the fear passed. It could not be so. Her plans had been laid and executed far too carefully.

So she coldly awaited the man's greeting.

It came. And its tone was unusually modulated. It was almost gentle. The man's eyes were a reflection of his tone as he gazed down at her. The effect was startling, and a light of wonder crept into Keeko's eyes as she looked up into the bloated face with its beard and general air of brutishness.

"You've cut it fine, Keeko," he said, with a swift, calculating glance at the sky. "I was getting well-nigh scared. We'll be snowed under right away." Then he drew a deep breath as of relief. "I'm glad you got to home."

Keeko had her part to play and she never hesitated.

"I was held up, but—I've had a good catch," she said, without enthusiasm. She pointed at the bale of pelts in her canoe. "They're silver fox. There's two more bales in the other boat. Guess Lorson Harris'll hand you a thousand dollars."

"Silver fox?" The man's eyes lit with cupidity. For a moment his seriousness passed out of them. "Why, that's great! You haven't got beyond grey fox and beaver ever before. It was a new territory?"

Keeko nodded. She was yearning to ask one question. One question only. But she knew the value of her success with this creature whom she could not yet openly defy.

"Yes. It was that held me up. I made farther down the river. Right to its mouth. It's a great fox country. Next year——"

But Nicol was unable to restrain his impatience. He turned to Little One Man.

"Haul 'em ashore an' open 'em out. We need to see the quality."

Little One Man looked at Keeko.

The girl nodded at once. Nicol saw the look and understood, and, for a moment, his eyes flashed with that ungovernable temper which was part of him. But the danger passed as swiftly as it came. Little One Man had flung the bundle ashore as Keeko stepped from the boat, and, in another moment, Nicol's sheath knife was ripping the thongs of rawhide which held it.

Keeko stood looking on watching the man's hands as he ran his fingers through the silken mass. He caressed the steely blue fur with the appreciation of a real pelt hunter, and presently stood up with a look in his eyes such as Keeko had never before beheld.

"How many?" he demanded.

"Sixty."

Nicol blew a faint whistle of astonished delight.

"You said a thousand dollars," he exclaimed. "Lorson Harris'll need to pay more than sixteen dollars for those pelts. We'll need twenty. Say, gal, you've done well. You surely have."

Keeko desired none of his praise. One thought only was in her mind. Up to that moment she had been playing the game she knew to be necessary. Now she reckoned she could safely abandon tactics in favour of her own desire.

"How's—mother?" she demanded.

Nicol stood up. His movement was a little precipitate. Nevertheless a moment passed before he withdrew his gaze from the treasure he coveted. When he finally did so it was not to look in the girl's direction. He was gazing out at the forest backing the fort.

Keeko became impatient. She was alarmed, too.

"How is she?" she cried urgently.

Nicol shook his head. He turned to the waiting Indians.

"We'll have them up at the store, and fix 'em ready for transport," he ordered. Then he sought to take the girl's arm while his hard eyes assumed a regret that utterly ill-suited them. "Come along up to the fort while I tell you."

But Keeko avoided him. Panic had seized her.

"No," she cried, in a tone she rarely permitted herself. "Tell me here—right now. Is—is she dead?"

She would take no denial. There was something in her clear, fearless eyes finely compelling. The man nodded.

"Dead?"

The girl spoke in a low, heart-broken whisper. She had forgotten the man. Dead! Her mother was dead. That poor suffering creature who had clung so long to life

in her frantic desire to safeguard her child. Dead! And she would never know the success of the plans she had laboured so ardently to work out.

Stunning as was the blow Keeko promptly reacted.

"When did she die?" she demanded, in a tone that no longer needed disguise.

"I'd say a month after you quit."

"And where—where's she buried?"

The man nodded in the direction of the woods at the back of the fort.

"Back there," he said. Then his manner became urgent. "Say, once we saw the end was coming ther' wasn't a thing left undone to make her easy. Lu-cana'll tell you that. We sat with her the whole time, and did all we knew. And we buried her deep down wher' the wolves couldn't reach her, and I set up a cross I fixed myself, and cut her name deep on it so it'll take years to lose."

Keeko recognized a sort of defence in the man's words and in his manner. It seemed to be his paramount purpose. She saw in him not a sign of real sorrow, real regret. Contempt and bitterness rose and robbed her of all discretion.

"When you saw the end coming!" she replied scornfully.

But Nicol ignored the tone.

"Yes," he said deliberately. "She didn't go short of a thing we could do—Lu-cana and me. We did our best. I don't guess you could have done a thing more. Will you come along up, an'—I'll show you."

"No!"

The reply was fierce. Keeko was at the extremity of restraint. She could no longer endure the man's presence. She could no longer listen to him.

"There's the pelts," she cried, pointing. "See to them.

That's your work." Then she looked him squarely in the eyes. "The other is for me—alone."

Nicol submitted. He had no alternative. And Keeko hurried away up to the fort.

. . . . . .

There was unutterable grief in Keeko's attitude. At her feet lay the low, long mound which marked her mother's grave. Beyond, at the head of it, was a rough wooden cross, hewn from stout logs of spruce. And deeply cut on the cross-bar was her mother's name prefixed by words of endearment. Just behind the girl stood the heavily blanketed figure of Lu-cana, whose eyes were shadowed by a grief which her lips lacked the power to express.

All about them reigned the living silence of the forest with its threat of hidden dangers. It was a silence where the breaking of a twig, the rustle of the soft, rotting vegetation, inches deep upon the ground, might indicate the prowling approach of famished wolf or scavenging coyote, the stealing of wildcat or even of the deadly puma.

The minutes passed as the two women stood voicelessly at the grave side. That which was passing in their minds was their own. Both, in their different fashions, had loved the woman laid so deep in the ground at their feet. And both knew, and perfectly understood, the life she had endured at the hands of the man who had set up the monument to her memory.

After a long time Keeko stirred. She drew a deep breath. It was the sign of passing from thought to activity. She turned to the woman behind her.

"How did she die, Lu-cana?" she asked, in a low voice.

Lu-cana drew near. She spoke in a tone as if in fear of

being overheard. And as she spoke she looked this way and that.

"She weep—weep all time when you go," she said brokenly. "She big with much fear. Oh, yes. She scare all to death. So. Days come—she live. She not eat. Oh, no. Days come many. An' all time she weep inside. She not speak. No. Her eye—it all time look around. Oh, much fear. Then one day she not wake. She die all up."

"And he?"

"Oh, him come all time. Him sit and mak' talk to her. I not know. Only him talk. Him go—she weep. Him go—she watch all scare. So it come she die all up."

Keeko pointed at the cross at the head of the grave.

"He set that up? Yes?"

"Him mak' him totem."

Keeko stood staring at the cross for some moments. Then she moved over to it and grasped it. It stirred in its setting. Then she left it, and returned to Lu-cana.

"He dared to set that up," she cried bitterly. "'In loving memory.'" She read the words before the name of her mother. "He dared to set up—that?"

Her eyes shone with a fierce light as she turned and looked into the squaw's face.

"Yes. Him set 'em up."

Lu-cana failed to understand that which lay at the back of Keeko's eyes. She could not read the words on the totem. She did not know their meaning when she heard them. All she knew was that the white man had done this thing.

Keeko pointed at it.

"Guess I'll make a new—totem," she said, in a tone that was only cold and hard. "And we'll set it up. You and me, Lu-cana. And that one—that one," she repeated with bitter emphasis, "we'll break it, we'll

smash it, and we'll burn it in the cook stove till there's nothing left."

. . . . . .

Keeko remained for two months at the fort. And the length of her stay was the result of careful calculation, and the necessity which her final break from association with her step-father demanded. Then, too, there was the season to consider. Before she set out on her journey to Seal Bay the fierce winter of Unaga must have completely closed down. No storm or cold had terror for her. All she required was the case-hardening of the world, which would leave an iron surface upon which the dog trains could travel.

During those two months the force of Keeko's character developed with giant strides. She was alone, utterly alone. Her whole life depended upon her own powers to carry out the plans which had seemed almost simple while her mother was still alive. Now everything had suddenly changed. Inevitably, had there been a shadow of weakness in the girl it must have found her out, and tripped her into some pitfall, floundering. But there was no such weakness.

From the first moment the enormous change wrought by her mother's death left her keenly understanding. Until the final break, her step-father must be humoured, conciliated. The thought was humiliating, but necessity urged. And she accepted the inevitable with simple courage.

Well enough was she aware of the danger in which she stood, and further the danger in which her required course placed her.

Had she known all that lay in the man's ruthless heart, had she been present at her mother's bedside, and listened to those talks which Lu-cana had told her of, had she

had less youth and courage and a deeper understanding of the realities of life, it is likely that panic would have sent her fleeing headlong from a presence that filled her with nothing but loathing. But she had been spared all this knowledge, and Nicol saw to it that nothing should startle her, nothing should excite her distrust until, in the fulness of time, his purposes had fully ripened.

As it was he accepted the position which Keeko had created. He played his part as she played hers. And right up to the very last moment before the girl's departure for Seal Bay nothing was permitted to disturb the harmony between them.

The man gave her farewell and received the girl's calm response. He watched her Indians break out the two sleds on the bitterly frosted trail. He heard her sharp tones echoing through the still air as she gave the order to "mush." And all the while he stood smiling, while his eyes followed every movement of the girl's graceful, fur-clad body with the insensate lust of an animal.

Robbed of all suspicion Keeko went forth with a heart high with hope. Away out lay her cache of priceless furs to be picked up within the next few hours. All the great plan which she and her mother had so carefully prepared looked to be reaching fulfilment. She had only to sell her furs and return and pay over her step-father's due. It would be springtime then.

All her mind and heart turned to Marcel. Yes. He would be there. Far away up the river where the old grey skull of the moose was watching for her coming. And then—and then— But imagination carried her no further. She was left longing only for that moment to come.

Nicol remained only long enough to see the runners of the hindmost sled vanish in a flurry of powdered snow round the limits of a woodland bluff. Then he turned

back to the dark old fort, and the mask under which he had so carefully concealed himself fell away. Straightway he returned to his store to flood his senses with the raw spirit which alone made his degenerate life tolerable.

. . . . . .

Winter was howling about the old fort. Drifts were piled feet deep against every obstruction that stood in the way of the driving snow. The fort was closed up. Every habitation was made fast against the onslaught of the elements Life was unstirring.

Far out in the woods bayed the fierce, famished timber wolf. The lighter but more doleful howl of coyote seemed to reply from every point of the compass. And amidst the rack of savage chorus came the harsh human voice that had little the better of the animal world in the pleasing quality of its note.

A train of three dogs hauling a light sled broke from the shadows of the forest. A single human figure on snow-shoes laboured along beside it. It was a figure entirely unrecognizable, except that it was human.

There was no pause, no uncertainty. The train came on and halted at a word of command at the doorway of the fort. In a moment the human figure was beating with its fur-mitted fists upon the door that had weathered the ages of storm.

The door was flung wide from within, and the blear eyes of Nicol peered out into the night-light. In a moment an exclamation of recognition broke from him.

"Alroy!" he cried. "'Tough' Alroy!" Then something of gladness at the prospect of companionship lit his eyes with a happier light. "Say, come right in," he invited, almost boisterously. "I'll send along some neches to see to your darn train."

Tough needed no second invitation. He smelt warmth.

rest, and there was the promise in his mind of a good "souse." For the time he had had enough of Unaga. He had had enough of his employer, Lorson Harris. He had had enough of snow and ice, and the merciless cold of the twilit trail. God! but he was glad to leave it all behind him for the warmth of Nicol's store, and the raw spirit he knew was to be found there in generous quantities.

Half an hour later, divested of his furs, clad only in rough buckskin and pea-jacket, with feet encased in thick reindeer moccasins, Tough sat over the trader's stove with a pannikin of evil smelling rye whisky in his hand.

"Guess I've driven through hell an' damnation to git your darn report," he said, his wicked eyes beaming across the stove at his host on the far side of it.

"Lorson's blasted orders?"

"You mean blasted Lorson's orders!"

"Amen—or any other old chorus—to that," returned Nicol, with a gleam of brooding hate in his dark eyes. "Say, that swine has got all us fellers by the back o' the neck, and he twists us this way and that as he darn pleases, till we're well-nigh crazy. I'd give half a life to cut it—to make a break that would quit me of it all. But——"

"You're scared," Tough laughed, as he gulped at his spirit. "Guess we all are." Then he added as an afterthought: "I wonder. I don't know I would if—I dared. He's tough. He'd beat a dead man to pieces if he felt that way. He's plumb to the neck in work that 'ud shame a black, but he pays good for the doin' of it. And he reckons to pay you mighty well, if you put this thing through right. Best hand me your news. He don't want it wrote out."

Nicol leant back in his chair, and thrust his feet on the rail of the stove.

"No, he don't fancy a thing wrote out," he said. "And anyway I'm writin' out nothing for Lorson Harris. He's got one piece of my paper, and I guess that's mostly why I'm here."

"And your summer trip?"

Tough recalled his host to the business in hand. He did it amiably, almost pleasantly, but such things were entirely upon the surface. Tough Alroy was Lorson's most trusted agent.

Nicol shook his head.

"Guess I didn't do all I figured to," he said. "You see, my fool woman took on and died. It cut the season short. But I located ther's a fort way out more than three hundred miles north-east of this lousy hole. Yes, it's more than three hundred miles north-east. Might be even four hundred. And there are folks running it. White folks. Three of my Shaunekuk boys got it dead pat. They ran into an outfit of queer sort of Eskimo pelt hunters. They were hunting the territory away north, up along this darn river. And they came from that post to the north-east. They said they were part of an outfit run by a feller named Brand. He was one of the white men running that post. They said these folk traded with Seal Bay. It was a big piece of luck. You see, the Shaunekuk never go into Unaga proper. They're scared to death of it. They make the forests along this river, that's all. Well, this outfit of queer Eskimo haven't ever been seen along this territory before. So you see I might have saved myself one hell of a rush trip that only took me to a place where I got a sight of a mighty tough looking hill, all smoke and fire. The three neches were out on their own and had their yarn waiting on me when I got back. That's my yarn, and all there is to it. Guess it's what Lorson Harris needs—until we make that fort, itself, for him."

Tough nodded. His wicked black eyes were serious, and, in their seriousness, were never more wicked.

"It'll do," he said. "Sure, it'll do. Guess it's a rough map of the trail we're chasing. But it's only the beginning. See, and listen close. Lorson Harris don't care a curse for the trade you make here with these fool neches. You ain't here for that, whatever you happen to think. You're here to make that trail. You're here to make that fort. And when you've made it, it's up to you to get possession of it. See? Lorson Harris means to bring that post right into his grip. There's a reason. A hell of a reason. It's so big he's ready to dope out a hundred thousand dollars to the man who can blot out the fellers trading there, and grab their trade. He reckons you're the man to do it. Well?"

Tough was leaning forward. His manner was deadly earnest and intended to impress. His keen black eyes stared hard into the bloated features of the man beyond the stove. He waited, watchful, alert.

"A hundred thousand dollars!"

Nicol's astonishment was without feigning. Suddenly he bestirred himself. He felt there must be some trick in it all.

"Would I need to—remain buried alive there?" he demanded.

Tough shook his head.

"Get possession of that place, that trade. Out those folks running the trade, and Lorson'll hand you one hundred thousand dollars in cash, and you'll be quit of the North if it suits you that way. You'll be quit of Lorson Harris, too. Well?"

"Gee!" Nicol passed a moist palm across his forehead.

"It's a swell proposition!"

"It's a hell of a proposition!"

"Well? You need to say right now. I don't need to remind you of Lorson Harris."

"God curse Lorson Harris!"

"Just so."

Tough was unrelenting in his pressure upon his victim. Lorson Harris chose his agents well.

Suddenly Nicol flung out his hands in a furious gesture.

"God's hell light on him! Yes," he cried, with eyes aflame, and his ungovernable temper surging. "I'll put his filthy work through. But when I've done it he'll need to hand me that hundred thousand dollars in cash right here before he learns a darn thing of the place he's yearning to grab. Get me? He reckons that he's got the drop on me. Well, maybe he has. But he don't get my tongue wagging till I get the cash pappy. Savee that, and savee it good!"

"But you'll do it?"

"That's what I've been shouting at you."

"Good. Now listen, and I'll pass you the rest of Lorson's message."

Tough emptied his pannikin to the dregs, and, leaning back in his chair, beamed across at the man he knew to be at the mercy of Lorson Harris. There was no feeling, no sympathy in him. He cared not one jot for anyone in the world but himself, and his standing with the man who paid for his services.

CHAPTER XIII

THE FAITH OF MEN

THE men crouched for warmth and the shadow of comfort over a miserable fire. The dogs were beyond, herded far within the shelter, their fierce eyes agleam with a reflection of the feeble firelight as they gazed out hungrily in its direction. It was a cavernous break in the rock-bound confines of a nameless Northern river.

Steve passed a hand down his face. He brushed away the moisture of melting ice. It was a significant gesture, accompanied as it was by a deep breath of weariness. Two hundred miles and more of Arctic terror lay behind him. As yet he had no reckoning of how much more lay ahead.

The world outside was lost in a chaos of warring elements. So it had lain for a week. In the fury of the blizzard the Arctic night was reduced to a pitchy blackness worse than the sightlessness of the blind.

How long? It was the question haunting Steve's mind, and the minds of those others with him. But the shrieking elements refused to enlighten him. It was their joy to mock, and taunt, and, if possible, to slay.

Steve rose from his seat over the fire. He turned and moved towards the mouth of the shelter. Beyond the light of the fire he had to grope his way. At the opening the snow was piled high, driven in by the storm. There

was left only the narrowest aperture leading to the black darkness beyond.

He paused at the opening. He was half buried in the drift, and the lash of the storm whipped his face mercilessly. For some moments he endured the assault, then his voice came back to the figures of his companions squatting moveless over the fire.

"Ho, you, Julyman!" he called sharply.

Moments later the Indian stood beside the white man, peering out into the desolation beyond.

"She's not going to last a deal longer."

Steve was wiping his face with a *bare* hand.

Julyman missed the movement in the darkness.

"She mak' him break bimeby—soon. Oh, yes."

There was something almost heroic in the attempt Julyman made to throw confidence into his tone. But Steve needed no such support. He was pre-occupied with his own discoveries. His bare hand was still wiping away the curiously moist snow that beat upon his face.

"Yes," he said conclusively. "She'll break soon." Then after a moment: "She's breaking *now*."

An interruption came from the distant dogs. It was the snarling yap of a quarrel. Then came the echo of Oolak's harsh voice and the thud of his club as he silenced them in the only manner they understood.

Steve's announcement failed to startle his companion. Nothing stirred Julyman but the fear of "devil-men," and his queer native superstitions.

"Him soften. Oh, yes," he said. "Wind him all go west. Him soft. Yes."

The wind had been carrying "forty below zero" on its relentless bosom. Its ferocity still remained, but now it was tempered by a warmth wholly unaccounted for by the change in its direction. A western wind in these latitudes was little less terrible than when it blew from

the north. It had over three thousand miles of snow and ice to reduce its temperature.

Steve's voice again came in the howl of the wind.

"Guess we'll get back to the fire," he said decisively.

Julyman needed no second bidding; he turned and moved away.

Back at the fire Oolak watched his companions retake their places. He had no questions to ask. He simply waited. That was his way. He seemed to live at all times with a mind absorbed.

Steve pointed at the diminished pile of scrub wood.

"Best make up the fire," he said, addressing Julyman.

The Indian eyed him doubtfully. Their store of fuel was perilously low.

"Sure," Steve nodded. And the Indian obeyed without further demur.

Steve re-lit his pipe and sucked at it comfortably. Then he spoke with an assurance he could not have displayed earlier.

"Say," he exclaimed, without looking up from the fire. "You get the meaning of it? Maybe you don't get the meaning I do."

He laughed. It was a curious laugh. It had no mirth. But it was an expression of feelings which required outlet.

"No. Maybe you don't," he went on. "You see, I got a—notion. The wind's west—now. It should be a hell of a cold wind. It isn't. No. It should be hellish cold," he reflected. "Why isn't it? The hills lie west. The big hills. Maybe *the* big hill. Well? I kind of wonder. Maybe it's that. It's a guess. A hell of a guess. Does the west wind hereabouts blow across the big fire hill? And are those fires so almighty hot they set the snow melting where all the world's freezing at 60° below? Is it a sort of chinook in the dead of winter?"

He raised his eyes to the faces of his companions. The dusky figures were half hidden behind the smoke of the fire, which rose between them. He nodded at the steady gazing black eyes.

"Yes," he said. "Guess that break's come. We'll be out on the trail right away. And we'll beat up against a breeze that's warming. It'll lead us to—the Heart of Unaga."

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The splendour of the Arctic night was shining over the world. There was scarcely a breath of wind. The air currents were still from the west, but the wind had died out. For the moment the amazing warmth which had stirred the imagination of Steve and his companions had passed.

A silver sheen played upon the limitless fields of snow. It was like a world of alabaster. The light came from every corner of the heavens. It came from the glory of a full moon, hard-driven to retain supremacy over its satellites. It came from the myriads of burnished stars, gleaming with a clarity, a penetrating sparkle, unknown to their brethren of lower latitudes. It came from the supreme magnificence of an aurora of moving light, dancing and curtseying with ghostly grace, as though stepping the measure of a heavenly minuet. Its radiance filled half the dome of night. It was a glory of frigid colour to ravish the artist eye.

The men on the trail had lost all sense of degrees of cold. It was simply cold. Always cold. A thermometer would have frozen solid. They knew that. Cold? So long as a strong, warm life burned in their bodies, and their stores of food remained, it was the best they could hope for.

And the dogs. They were bred to the Arctic cold.

So is the bear of the Pole. They needed no better than to follow their labours with a couch burrowed beneath the snows, and hours for the dream feast which their ravening appetites yearned and never tasted.

The outfit had broken trail as Steve had promised, and it was moving through the ghostly world like insects a-crawl over the folds of an ill-spread carpet.

The course had been deflected in response to the change of wind. Steve had left the shelter of the river where it had definitely turned northward. He had left it without regret. He had no regret for anything which did not further his purpose. Adresol! The quest of the Adresol pastures was the whole aim and object of his life. Somewhere out there over the desolate wastes he believed the great secret of it all lay awaiting his discovery. Nothing else, then, was of any significance.

For the moment Nature seemed bent on favouring him. For over two hundred miles she had beaten him well-nigh breathless. She had hurled her storms at him without mercy, and, at the end of her transcendent fury, she had found him undismayed, undefeated. Perhaps his tenacity excited her admiration. Perhaps she was nursing her wrath for a more terrible onslaught. Whatever her mood he was ready to face it.

At the beginning of the third week since leaving the shelter on the river Steve trod the first of the western hills under foot, and awaited the coming of the train upon its summit. His, dark, fur-clad figure stood out in relief against the world about him. It looked squat, it was utterly dwarfed in the twilit vastness. But there was something tremendous in the meaning of that living presence in the voiceless solitudes which the ages have failed to stir.

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The sleds were still. The dogs lay sprawled for rest awaiting the will of their masters. Julyman stood abreast of Steve, tall, lean, but bulky in his frosted furs. Oolak stood over his dogs, which were his first care.

"You can feel it now," Steve said, thrusting a hand under his fur helmet. A moment later he withdrew fingers that were moist with sweat. "If the wind came down at us out of the hills now we'd need to quit our furs. Do you get that? Quit our furs here in the dead of winter. It's getting warmer every mile."

"It warm. Much warm. Oh, yes."

Julyman's resources of imagination were being sorely taxed.

Steve nodded.

"Yes," he said. "It isn't wind now. There's no wind. It's the air. It's warm. It's getting warmer. Later it'll get hot as hell."

He drew a profound breath. He felt that victory was very near. It only needed——

"We got to beat on all we know," he said, examining the brilliant heavens. "We need to grab every moment of this weather. We don't know. We can't guess the things waiting on us. Yes. We'll 'mush' on."

His tones were deep. The restraint of years which the Northland had bred into him was giving way before the surge of a hope that was almost certainty. And his order was obeyed by men who knew no law but his will.

But for all the urgency of his mandate, for all his efforts, progress slackened from the moment the first hill was passed. From the seemingly limitless plains of snow, rolling maddeningly in a succession of low hills and shallow hollows, now it seemed that Nature spurned the milk and water fashioning of her handiwork, and had hurled the rest of the world into a wreckage of broken, barren hills.

Into the midst of this chaos Steve plunged.

For awhile the confusion robbed him of all certainty. It not infrequently left decision floundering. The mountains leapt at him with a rush from every side, confusing direction and reducing even instinct to something like impotence. With familiarity, however, his trained mind adapted itself. Then the rush went on with the old irresistible confidence.

But human endurance was sorely tested. The tasks often became well-nigh insuperable. There were moments when dogs and Indians lay beaten in the midst of their labours, without will, without energy to stir another yard. It was at such times that despair knocked at the strong heart of the man who had never learned to yield, and who had never quite known defeat.

But even in the worst moments the steadily warming air never failed to lure. It breathed its soft message of promise into Steve's ready ears, supporting a heart powerless to resist the appeal.

The change to warmth, however, had another and less pleasing aspect. The snow lost its icy case-hardening. A rot set in. On the hill-tops the ice was not always reliable. In the valleys men sank up to their knees in slushy depths. Even the broad tread of snow-shoes failed to save them. Then, too, the dogs floundered belly-deep, and the broad bottoms of the sleds alone saved the outfit from complete disaster. The increasing hardships left Steve without respite. It was only on the hill-tops, when the veer of the wind carried it to the northward, and, for a brief spell, Arctic conditions returned, that any measure of ease was ironically vouchsafed.

The effort was tremendous. It went on for days whose number it was difficult to estimate in the grope of the unchanging twilight. A day's work might be a single

hill conquered. It might be a moist, clammy valley crossed. Perhaps two miles, three, or even five. Distance remained unconsidered. For always was the next effort no less than the last, till mind, and heart, and body were worn well-nigh threadbare. There was no pause, no hesitation. It must be on, on to the end, or—disaster.

Steve knew. Only the barest necessity of rest could be permitted both for himself, his men, his dogs. The faith of his men still burned strongly in hearts which he had never known to fail, but he dared not risk the chance of a prolonged inactivity with its opportunity for contemplation of the hell through which they were all passing. He knew. Oh yes. He knew from his understanding of his own feelings and emotions.

He lived in the daily hope of discovering something with which to dazzle imagination already dulling. His faith was pinned to the summit of a great, grey headland towering amongst its fellows ahead. He had discovered its presence long since, and, from the moment of discovery, he had sought its elusive slopes. Instinct, that had no great reason to support it, warned him that the view from its summit would tell them the things they desired to know. And they were the things they all must learn quickly if failure were not to rob them of the fruits of their great adventure.

Yes. He desired that dull grey summit just now as he desired nothing else in the world.

Every emotion was stirring when, at length, Steve found himself climbing the last of the upward slopes of the "Hill of Promise," as he had named it. He had laughed as he coined the name. But there had been no laughter in his heart. If the promise were not fulfilled——?

But it would be fulfilled. It must be fulfilled. These

were the things Steve told himself in that fever of straining which only mental extremity knows.

He topped the last rugged lift to the summit. His men were somewhere below, floundering in his wake. He had no heed for them just now. Hope, a fever of hope alone sustained his weary limbs over the inhospitable ice.

A great shout echoed down the slope. It came with all the power of a strong man's lungs.

"Ho, you! Quick!"

Steve had reached the rugged crest. A second shout came back to the floundering Indians.

"God! It's a—wonder!"

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The moment was profound. Eyes that were prepared for well-nigh anything monstrous gazed out spellbound. Tongues had no words, and hearts were stirred to their depths. The whole world ahead was afire. It was a conflagration of incalculable immensity.

The horizon was one blaze of transcendent light. It was rendered a hundred-fold more amazing by its contrast against the grey of the Arctic night. At a given point, in the centre of all, a well of fire was belching skywards. It was churning the overhanging clouds of smoke, and lighting them with the myriad hues that belong to the tumbled glory of a stormy summer sunset. Then, too, rumblings and dull thunders came up to the watching men like the groanings of a world in travail.

For miles the hill-tops seemed to have been swept clear of ice and snow. They were shorn of their winter shroud. They stood up like black, unsightly, broken teeth, against a cavernous background of fire burning in the maw of some Moloch colossus. They stood out bared to the bone of the world's foundations.

Julyman shaded his eyes with hands that sought to shut out a vision his savage superstition could no longer support. Oolak had no such emotion. He turned from it to something which, to his mind, was of greater interest. Steve alone remained absorbed in that radiant beyond.

The Arctic night no longer reigned supreme. It seemed to have been devoured at a gulp. The heavenly lights had lost all power in face of this earthly glory. A mist of smoke had switched off the gleam of starlight, and the moon and mock-moons wore the tarnished hue of silver that has lost its burnish. The ghosts of the aurora no longer trod their measure of stately minuet. They had passed into the world of shadow to which they rightly belonged.

The heart of Unaga was bared for all to see, that fierce heart which drives the bravest Indian tongue to the hush of dread.

"We not mak' him—that! Oh, no!"

Julyman's tone was hushed and fearful. He moved close to the white man in urgent appeal.

"Boss Steve not mak' him. No. Julyman all come dead. Julyman not mush on. Oh, no."

"Julyman'll do just as 'Boss' Steve says."

Steve had dragged his gaze from the wonder that held it. He was coldly regarding the haunted eyes of a man he knew to be fearless enough as men understand fearlessness.

This was no time for sympathy or weakness. It was his purpose to penetrate to that blazing heart, as nearly as the object of his journey demanded. He was in no mood to listen patiently to words inspired by benighted superstition.

"Him—Unaga!" Julyman protested, his outstretched arm shaking. "No—mak' him? Yes?"

"We mak' this!"

It was Oolak who answered him. He spoke with a preliminary, contemptuous grunt. He, too, was pointing. But he was pointing at that which lay near at hand. He stood leaning his crippled body on his gee-pole, and gazing down at that which lay immediately in front of them, groaning and grumbling like some suffering living creature.

Steve followed the direction of the outstretched arm. He had been absorbed in the distance. All else had been forgotten. He found himself gazing down upon what appeared to be a cascading sea of phosphorescent light. He recognized it instantly, and the fiery heart of Unaga was forgotten.

A mighty glacier barred the way, and the peak on which they stood was its highest point. It stretched out far ahead. It reached beyond such range of vision as the Arctic night permitted. It sloped away down, down, so gradually, yet so deeply, so widely that it warned him of the opening of the jaws of a mighty valley, through the heart of which there probably flowed the broad bosom of a very great river. The play of the phosphorescent light was the reflection of Unaga's lights caught by the myriad facets of broken ice upon its tumbled surface.

Steve nodded.

"Yes. We make this," he cried, in a fashion to forbid all discussion. Then after a pause that gave his decision due effect: "There's a valley away out there. And I guess it'll likely hand us the things we got to know. We've beaten those darn hills. We've beaten the snow and ice—and the cold. The things we're going to find down there need beating, too."

He turned from the barrier which left him undismayed. A great light was shining in his eyes as he passed Julyman by. They rested eagerly, questioningly, upon the unemo-

tional face of Oolak whose keen understanding he knew to be profound.

"Well?" he demanded in the fashion of a man aware that his question is not in vain.

Oolak turned. He raised his face, and his sensitive nostrils distended with a deep intake of breath. A moment later he made a swift gesture with the gee-pole on which he had been supporting himself.

"I mak' him smell. So!"

He spoke with unusual animation.

Steve had been seeking and waiting for just such words.

"You smell—what?" he demanded.

"Oolak smell him all sweet—lak'—lak'——"

Steve interrupted with a nod.

"I know," he cried. "Like—like——"

But that which he would have said remained unspoken. There was no need for words. The rest was in his eyes, in his voice. Oolak's corroboration of the evidence of his own senses meant the final triumph he was seeking.

CHAPTER XIV

THE VALLEY OF DREAMS

STEVE'S dream of triumph was brief. Born at the moment of his first sight of the burning heart of Unaga it lived to provide a stimulant for jaded mind and body at a time of need. Then he awoke to realities such as he had never contemplated.

For once experience and imagination failed him. He was entering a land of wonder in the belief that he was prepared for everything monstrous in Nature. He believed that with the stupendous vision of Unaga he had witnessed Nature's most sublime effort. So, out of his confidence he was trapped as easily as a man of no experience at all.

At his bidding dogs and men moved to the assault of the glacial barrier. The thing that they contemplated was by no means new. A hundred times had the broken surface of glacier formed some part of their long winter trail. It was never without danger, but it was never a sufficient barrier to give them pause.

The surface of the glacier appeared to be that which they all knew. The only feature for disquiet were the thunderous detonations, the deep rumbling groans that rose up out of its far-off heart, and found a hundred echoes amongst the surrounding hills. For the rest, it was a broken surface, bearing every feature of a summer thaw frozen down again by the icy breath

of winter, and adorned with a patchwork of drift snow.

Half a mile from the grey headland which was their starting point, confidence received its first check. It was Oolak who made discovery. The watchful, silent creature was unerring in his instincts, unerring in his scent of a treachery he always anticipated. He had halted his dogs, and stood in the half light, peering out this way and that at the legions of ice spectres surrounding them. Then, quite suddenly, he hailed the white man to his side, and indicated the ice on which they were standing.

"It all him move," he said, with his peculiarly significant brevity.

Steve stood for a moment without reply. He was less sensitive to indications than the Indian. In fact he failed to realize the thing the other had discovered. He shook his head.

"Guess you're——"

But his denial remained uncompleted. It was interrupted by a sharp cry from Julyman some distance away with the rear sled. The two men turned in his direction. They beheld his lean figure busy amongst his dogs, plying his club impartially, as though in an effort to quell some canine dispute.

But that was not all. As they gazed they saw the iron-shod tail of the sled rise up. It seemed to be flung up with great force. For a moment it remained poised. Then it crashed over on its side to the accompaniment of a cracking, splitting roar, like the bombardment of massed artillery.

Steve waited for nothing. Even with the roar of subglacial thunders hammering on his ear drums, he rushed to the man's assistance. Oolak turned to his own dogs.

The din subsided almost in a moment. Steve reached

the sled where Julyman had beaten the dogs to the required condition. In a moment they were at work setting things to rights. After that the dogs were strung out afresh, and Julyman "mushed" them on, and brought them abreast of the train of the waiting Oolak.

The dogs crouched down on the rough surface of the inhospitable ice. Their great limbs were shaking under heavy coats of fur, and they whimpered plaintively, stirred by some unspeakable apprehension. The men were standing by, gazing back over the ghostly field of ice, with wonder and disquiet in their eyes.

Again it was Oolak who spoke. He pointed at the headland from which they had started. It was dim, shadowy, half lost in the grey twilight.

"Him all go back," he said, as though he were making the most ordinary announcement.

Then he pointed at something nearer. It was just beyond where the sled had been overturned.

"Him all break up. So."

His tone had changed. There was that in his harsh voice which was utterly new to it.

It was the moment of Steve's awakening from the dream of triumph he had dreamed. It was the moment of the shattering of the confidence of years. A wide fissure, of the proportions of a chasm, had opened up just beyond where the mishap had occurred. It was as Oolak said. The grey headland looked to be moving backwards, vanishing in the shadows of the Arctic night.

The approach to the heart of Unaga was yielding a reality that had been entirely uncalculated.

The widening chasm, stretching far as the eye could see on either hand, had completely cut off all retreat. Steve and his men were standing on a belt of ice that was moving. It was slipping away from the parent body, gliding ponderously almost without tangible motion,

down the great glacial slope. They were trapped on the bosom of a glacial field in the titanic throes of its death agony; a melting, groaning mass riding monstrously to its own destruction in those far-off, mist-laden depths of the valley below.

It must have been unbelievable but for the definite evidence of it all. Here, in the depths of an Arctic winter, with the whole earth shadowed under a grey of frigid night, a glacial field, which a thousand years could not have built up, was melting under a heat no less than the summer of lower latitudes.

It was a moment for panic. But Steve resisted with all his might.

The position was supremely critical. There were no means of retreat in face of that amazing fissure. There could be no standing still. They must go on with the dread tide of grinding ice, on and on to the end. And for the end their trust must be in the gods of fortune for such mercies as they chose to vouchsafe.

Steve's order rang out amidst the booming of the ice. It was urgent. It was fierce in the need of the moment. The Indians knew. He had no need to explain. Before them lay the hideous downward slope with possible hell at the bottom. And the demon of avalanche was hard upon their heels.

In a frenzy the dogs leapt at their work. There was no need for club or urging. They were only too eager to quit the quaking ice and lose their consciousness of the thunders of the under-world in a rush of vital movement.

Steve warned himself there remained a fighting chance. It was the man's courage which inspired the thought. The dogs took the only chance they knew. They at least understood the soullessness of Nature's might when arrayed for destruction.

Steve drove for the fringe of it all, where the ice lapped

against the rising walls of the valley to which they were dropping. It was his only course. He felt it to be his only chance. He had no real hope. It was instinctive decision unsupported by reason. He knew that ahead lay the great valley obscured under a fog of mist, and he could only guess at the perils that lay hidden there.

No, he did not know. He had no desire to question. Instinct alone could serve him now, and instinct urged him to flee from the middle course of the glacier as he would flee from the breath of pestilence.

From the first moments of blind rush for safety all sense of time became utterly lost. So, too, with fatigue. So, too, with the matter of distance. Labour became well-nigh superhuman amidst the moving ice hummocks. And the speed, and the jolting, and pitching of the sleds transformed the chaotic world about them into still more utter confusion.

The sweaty mist came up from below seeking to enshroud them in long, gauzy tentacles.

How long the struggle endured it would have been impossible to tell. There was thought only for the fissures that opened with a roar at their feet, for the ice driving down upon their heels, for the melting streams coursing amongst the hummocks. And—the threat of the enveloping mists.

The dogs ran with the recklessness of a stampede, and the precious burden of the sleds was a treasure upon the salving of which mind and body were concentrated to the exclusion of all else. Even the security of life and limb was a matter of far less concern.

The mist closed down. The terror of sightlessness was added to the rest.

Utter helplessness supervened. It was the final disaster. The closing down of the fog meant the last of intelligent effort. The whole outfit was left groping,

blind, and conscious only of the terror of the downward rush they could no longer check. Ghostly ice hummocks rose up at them out of the darkness and buffeted like frigid legions advancing to the attack. Fissures yawned agape. The booming ice roared on, deafening, maddening. It was the struggle of brave men doomed. It was sublimely pitiful. It was a moment for the tears of angels.

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Out of the west the breeze had freshened. It came in little hasty gusts, like the breath of invisible giants. The inky night seemed to lighten, and, here and there, the flash of a star shone out, while a faint, silvery sheen struggled for mastery in the stirring fog which fought so desperately to deny the eyes of the Arctic night.

A distant booming came up out of the fog. It was the softened sound of far-off thunder. There was another sound, too. It was less awesome, but no less significant. It was the steady droning of cascading waters falling in a mighty tide. It suggested the plunge into the darkness of an abyss, or even the lesser immensity of surging rapids in the course of a mountain river.

Steadily the western breeze increased. It lost its patchiness and settled to a pleasant, warming drift. Slowly the inky darkness rolled away. The peeping stars remained, or only lost their radiance in the gossamer lightness of passing mist. The silver of the aurora shone down triumphantly upon *the snowless earth*, and the glory of the moon lit the remoteness with its frigid smile.

On the dark monotony of an earth robbed of its winter clothing a cluster of moving figures stood out in faint relief, and presently a light flashed out like the infinitesimal blaze of a firefly in the night. It passed, and then

it came again. Again it passed. And again it came. This time it lived and grew. A fire had lit, and the group of figures were crouching over it as though to protect it against the dark immensity of the world surrounding them.

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The distant thunders had died away. No longer was there the ominous droning of falling waters. The utter stillness of the Arctic night was supreme.

The steady play of the western breeze came down the highway of the valley whose far-off slopes rose to unmeasured heights. To the westward the dull reflections of earthly fire lit the sky with deep, sanguinary hues, and the starlight seemed to have lost its power behind a haze of cloud. For the rest the night was lit by the aurora.

Steve and his Indians were standing on the moist banks of a broad, flowing river, the surface of whose waters served as a mirror to the splendid lights above. Away behind them, where the ground rose up towards the higher slopes, was the glimmer of the fire which marked their camp. They were all three gazing out at the western reflection of earthly fires.

For the moment there was silence. For the moment each was absorbed in his own thought. None gave a sign of the nature of that thought, but it was an easy thing to guess since their faces were turned towards the reflection of Unaga's fires.

It was Steve who first withdrew his gaze. He seemed reluctant. He turned and surveyed the snowless territory about them.

It was an extraordinary display of Nature's mood. They were treading underfoot a growth of lank grass, and the slopes of the valley were clad with bluffs of bare-poled woodlands. The air was warm. It was warmer

than the breath of a temperate winter, and the low-growing scrub marking the course of the river was breaking into new growth of a whitish hue.

The amazement of the discovery of these things had long since passed. Steve and his Indians had returned again to the reality of things.

Steve drew a deep breath.

"We can't make another yard with the dogs," he said. "The snow's gone. It's gone for keeps."

It was a simple statement of the facts. And Oolak and Julyman were equally alive to them.

"Then him all mak' back?"

There was eagerness in Julyman's question. The terror of that through which they had passed was still in his mind. So, too, with the fiery heart of Unaga that lay ahead. Oolak had nothing to add, so he kept to his customary silence.

Steve shook his head.

"There's no quitting," he said simply. "Guess we've come nigh three hundred miles. We've got through a territory to break the heart of a stone image. God's mercy helped us back on that darn glacier when we were beat like dead men. It's a sort of dream I just can't remember, and don't want to anyway. Say, do you guess a miracle was sent down to us, which kept us clear of going over that darn precipice with the ice? Was it a miracle that carried us where there wasn't worse than a flow banking on the slope of this valley? Was the mercy of it all sent to have us quit now, with the end of things coming right to our hand? I just guess not. It's there ahead. Somewhere down this valley. We can smell it so plain we'll need the poison masks in a day's journey. There's going to be no quitting. The sleds'll have to stop right here. And the dogs. You boys, too. Guess I'm going on afoot. When I've located the stuff," he

went on, his eyes lighting, and his words coming sharply, "when I locate the stuff in full growth, the harvest we're yearning to cut, why, then I'll get right back here, and we'll go afoot, all three of us, and we'll cut it, and bale it, and portage it right here to the sleds. And when we've got all we can haul we'll cast for that trail the Sleepers make in summer, and just cut out all that hell of ice we came over. That's how I see it. And we're going to put it right through if it breaks us, and beats us to death."

Steve spoke with his eyes fixed upon the far-off lights of Unaga. His words were the words of a man obsessed. But there was nothing in his manner to suggest a mind weakening under its burden. It was simple, sane determination that looked out of his eyes.

Julyman answered him, and a world of relief was in his tone.

"Him dog. Him sled. All him Indian man him stop by camp. Oh, yes."

Steve nodded. Then he pointed out down the river.

"It's a crazy territory anyway," he said. "Those darn fires have turned it summer when winter's freezing up the marrow of things. When summer gets around I guess it's likely the next thing to hell. But the thing we're yearning for is lying there, somewhere ahead. And I'm after it if I never make the fort again, and the folks we've left behind. Come on. We'll get right back to camp. I need to fix things for the big chance I'm going to take, and you boys'll wait around till I get back. If things go wrong, and this thing beats me, why, just hang on till you figger the food trucks liable to leave you short, then hit a trail over the southern hills and work around back to the fort with word to Marcel and An-ina. Guess there won't be any message."

CHAPTER XV

THE HEART OF UNAGA

ALONE in the great silence. Without even the cry of desolation wrung from starving wolf, or the howl of depression which ever seems to haunt the heart of the coyote world. Alone with groping thought, with burning hope, and the undermining of doubt which the strongest cannot always shake off. Steve had taken the plunge which robbed him of human companionship.

It was the prompting of that spirit which borders so closely the line where earthly sanity passes. It was the spirit which finds its inspiration in the Great Purpose which drives on for the achievement of the human task on earth. The dreamer of dreams is born to translate his visions into reality, or to lie broken before the task. Steve was no visionary. He was something more, something greater. His was the stern heart of purpose selected for the translation of the dream of the dreamer who had fallen by the way.

Steve permitted himself no reflection upon the spiritual appeal of his purpose. These things might concern those of a wider, deeper intelligence. Or, perhaps, those whose weakness unfitted them for the battle of the strong. It was for him to claim issue in the battle he sought. And come life and victory, or death and defeat, he was prepared to accept the verdict without complaint.

The twinkling eyes of the heavens searched down upon

the infinitesimal moving figure. Their cold smile was steely, perhaps with the irony the sight inspired. Their world was so coldly indifferent to human survival.

The snowless breasts of the valley rose up miles away to the north and south. And between their swelling contours lay a country of lesser hills and valleys, equally snowless, and whose heart was the flood of a great river.

Sterility had passed. Here were no barren hill-crests with a hundred weatherworn facets. Here were no fields of snow, driven by the fierce gales of the polar seas. Here were no glacial fields bound in an iron grip throughout the ages. The fires in the heart of Unaga were burning. Their warming was in the breath of the breeze. It was in the very earth, yielding its fruit with the freedom of the temperate world.

A wood-clad country of almost luxurious vegetation, there was in it a suggestion of the sub-tropical. But under the twilight of Arctic winter it had lost the happy hues of a sunlit season. True, the conifers retained their dull, dark foliage, but, for the rest, the bare branches were alive with a new-born cloak that possessed the whiteness of fresh-fallen snow. Even the lank grass under foot was similarly awakening.

The wonder of it all must have been amazing had Steve not been prepared for some such phenomenon. Was not this crazy valley the reality of that vision he had set before Marcel? It was the melting spring of temperate latitudes transposed to the confines of the Arctic Circle. It was a land of still, wonderful, voiceless life, whose air was sweet, and heavy laden with a subtle perfume.

He wondered, as he paced on under the burden of the pack his broad shoulders were supporting. His mind was a riot with questioning. What of the rest? Would the whole dream become reality? Why not? What of

the day when the sun rose again from its long winter sleep?

For answer he gazed out ahead where a pillar of fire looked to be supporting the clouded heavens. The logic of it all was plain. There was no real question in his mind. With the returning light of the sun, and the steadily rising temperature, the ghostly foliage would promptly assume Nature's happy green and the world would ripen with the rapidity of a forcing house. Then——

Steve's eyes were suddenly raised to the dark vault of the skies. The lights of the night had been largely obscured. Only the heart of Unaga still remained shining with unabated splendour. It was *raining!*

Rain had ceased. The dripping figure of Steve was at rest on the low, white-clad summit of a hill. He had no care for his condition as he steamed under the dank heat of the valley. His eyes were steadily regarding the wonder world of the west.

For a long time he stood almost without movement. He was seeking, seeking in every direction. But the rosy twilight baffled him. Unaga buried her secrets deeply, and only was there the perfume in the air which she could not conceal. This was the key with which Steve meant to open the door of her treasure house.

He raised his face and drew a deep breath through sensitive nostrils. Then he exhaled slowly, deliberately, and his lips moved. Now there was taste in the air as well as perfume. The change had come with the rainfall.

He stooped and deposited his pack on the moist ground. Then he unfastened it. A few moments later he was standing erect again, and his face was half hidden under a curiously constructed mask. Again he turned to the west. Again he inhaled deeply. And as he did so satisfaction lit his steady eyes. The scent of the air,

its sickly sweetness, had entirely passed as he breathed under the mask.

He returned to his pack and fastened it up. Then he reslung it upon his shoulders. When he passed from the summit of the hill the mask that was to serve him when the danger line was reached had been removed.

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Steve laboured on sweatily. He had halved the weight of his pack. He had even removed his buckskin shirt. The heat was amazing. It nearly stifled him.

With each mile gained the spectacle of Unaga's fires grew in intensity and sublime fury. The whole of the western world looked to be engulfed in a caldron of fire; while the belching source of it all flamed at the summit of its earthly column, amidst a churning, rose-tinted froth of cloud banks.

Changes came in swift succession. Perhaps the most significant of all was the complete change in the aspect of the heavens, and in the sulphurous grit with which the air was laden. The stars had vanished. The flood of northern light had lost its clearness; now only a ghostly shadow of its glory remained. There was only one moon. Its manifold reflections were lost in the mist, and the shining silver of its own light was painfully tarnished.

For all this, however, the light in the valley was no less. Its character had changed. That was all. The rosy twilight was growing to an angry gleaming.

Steve knew his journey's end was near. How near he could not tell. He reminded himself that there must be a barrier, a dividing line, beyond which no life could endure. But he also knew that the field of Adresol must lie on the hither side of it. If that were not so, what of the Indians to whom it yielded supplies for the pleasant calm of their winter's sleep?

Steve knew he was by no means witnessing a simple volcanic eruption. It was something far greater. The suggestion of it all was so colossal that he could find no concrete form in which to express his belief. In his mind there had formed an idea that here was a whole wide territory forming one great vent to the subterranean fires demanding outlet. It seemed to him that those fires had been lit just where they now burned. Maybe they had been lit on the day that dry land was first born upon the earth, and throughout the ages had never been permitted to die out.

Fascination held him enthralled as he laboured over the weary miles of the valley. Every swamp became a potential objective for examination. Every broken hill might conceal some secret valley where subterranean heat produced a growth foreign to the more open regions. He could afford to miss no canyon however small, lest the secret he sought lay hidden there. And all the time with the hot breath of the westerly breeze in his nostrils, the lure of the sickly perfume beckoned him on.

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It was sheer mental and bodily weariness that brought Steve to a prolonged halt. The heat was overpowering him at last. This strange land with its ruddy twilight had become a labour beyond endurance. It was as if the waters of the river were being evaporated into a steam which left the air unbreathable.

Halfway to the summit of a great wood-clad hill, that jettied across from the southern slopes of the valley to the northern limits beyond, he had flung himself to rest in a wide clearing surrounded by the cold delicacy of white-hued foliage. In his moment of helplessness there seemed to be no end to his journey. He felt that the

great summit he was reaching towards meant only a descent beyond, and then again another, and still another steep ascent.

Only for a few moments had he sprawled, seeking rest. He was thinking and gazing back over his long solitary trail, peering into the reverse of that upon which he had looked so long. It was intensely restful thus to turn his gaze from the belching fires. Once his heavy eyelids closed. But he bestirred himself. Later he would sleep, but not now. His day's work was— Again his eyes closed heavily, and his hand fell from the support of his head.

It was that which wakened him. And in a moment a thrill of panic flashed through his nerves. With all his will flung into the effort, he forced himself to complete wakefulness. He sat up. He groped in his loosened pack. He pulled out of it the mask he had tested once before, and, with desperate haste, adjusted it over mouth and nostrils.

It had been near, so near. He knew now how nearly disaster had clutched at him. Furthermore he knew that even now the danger was by no means passed. The heavy fumes of Adresol were creeping through the woods about him. They were stealing their ghostly, paralyzing way low down upon the ground, drifting heavily along until the open below brought them to the stronger air currents which would disperse them on their eastward journey, robbing them of their deadly toxin, and reducing them to a simple sickly perfume.

He had leapt to his feet. He stood swaying like a drunken man, while a strange bemusing attacked his brain and left a singing in his ears. Staggering under the influence of the deadly drug, he fled from the clearing up towards the hill-top.

. . . . . .

It was victory! Complete, overwhelming.

Steve was gazing out upon a wide, seemingly limitless tableland. In every direction it spread itself out, far as the eye could see. To the west it looked to launch itself into the very heart of the land of fire which was shedding its ruddy light from miles and miles away. To the north it went on till it lost itself against the slopes of the lofty, containing hills of the valley. Southward, its spread was swallowed up under a rolling fog of smoke, which settled upon the world like a pall. It was a great, white, limitless field of dead white lily bloom, unbroken, unsullied, like the perfect damask of napery, purer in tone than virgin snow.

The great cup-like blooms stood up nearly to the height of his shoulders. They were superb in their gracious form, and suggested nothing so much as a mask of innocence and purity concealing a heart of unimaginable evil.

Steve gazed at those nearest him with mixed feelings of repulsion and delight. Nor could he wholly rid himself of the fear his knowledge inspired. His mask was closely adjusted over mouth and nostrils, and he knew that it was only that product of the dead chemist's genius that stood between him and a dreamless sleep from which there would be no awakening.

And as he gazed he became aware of a strange phenomenon. Each lily was slightly inclining its gaping mouth towards the distant heart of Unaga, which inspired its life. To him it suggested an attitude of the devoutest worship. It seemed to his mind that these strange plants, containing all that was most beneficent, and all that was most deadly in their composition, were yielding a silent expression of thankful worship to the tremendous power which saved them from the frigid death to which the dead of Arctic winter would otherwise have condemned them.

His feelings yielded to the profound wonder of it all. For all his fear his soul was stirred to its depths. And his thankfulness was no less than his wonder.

Yes, it was victory at last, after years of ceaseless effort. It was a victory surpassing even his wildest hopes. Here was the wonderful field of growing Adresol in all the glory of full bloom. Here was an inexhaustible supply of the drug the world of healing science was crying out for. It was here, in its deadliest form, awaiting the reapers. A harvest such as would accomplish everything he had ever hoped to achieve.

And as the moments passed, and his confidence in the protecting mask grew, so a wonderful spirit buoyed him. It was a condition he had parted from many years ago. A happy, joyous smile lit his eyes. It grew, and broke into a laugh. He reached out and daringly plucked a great stem supporting a perfect bloom. He stood gazing into the deep, cup-like heart for prolonged moments. He was thinking of Ian Ross and the days so far back in his mind. Fifteen years? Yes. More. And now——

He contemplated with joy the labours ahead. The return to Oolak and Julyman. The work of the harvest. The portaging of it. The packing of the sleds. Then the long, last homeward trail with a success achieved beyond his dreams. It was something indeed to have lived for and laboured for. Marcel!

CHAPTER XVI

KEEKO AND NICOL

IT was all so drab, so cheerless. Outside the snow was still piled to the depth of many feet, the ice still held the river in its chill embrace. But the temperature was rising. The open season was advancing.

Keeko was aware of it. There were weeks of melting to pass yet. But soon——

Inside, the vault-like store was warm enough. But it was dark, and squalid, and it reeked with the taint which only the centuries can impart. These things impressed themselves never so much upon Keeko as now, while she sat over the warming stove.

She had just returned from Seal Bay. She had passed most of the winter on the trail with her Indians. She preferred their company in desperate circumstances to the associations of Fort Duggan. During those long months she had planned the future for herself, a future which had nothing to do with Nicol, but which took him into her calculations. She possessed a wonderful faculty for clear thinking. And her decision had been irrevocably taken.

Nicol was leaning on the heavy oaken bench that served him for a counter, and about him, and behind him, were the piled stocks of his trade. He was preoccupied. Keeko was glad enough. She had returned only in the execution of her plans, and to prepare for the

moment when she intended to steal her freedom, and shut this man's companionship for ever out of her life.

Just now her thoughts were far away as she basked in the warmth of the stove. They were upon the coming spring, the opening river, upon the old moose head set up to watch for her coming, and—upon Marcel.

Once she turned her head, and into her pretty eyes there crept a look which was almost of disquiet. The man's dark head and bearded face were bent over the sheet of paper upon which he was scratching with a stub of pencil. There was a small heap of paper money beside him. There was also a largish glass of raw rye whisky, from which he frequently drank. It was the sight of this latter that caused the girl's look of disquiet. It was the second drink in less than half an hour. She turned away with an added feeling of repugnance, and she reckoned again the number of weeks that must pass before her freedom came.

It was at the moment of her turning back to the stove that the scratching of the pencil ceased. The man looked up, and his bold smiling eyes were turned upon the girl. He drained his glass noisily while his eyes remained upon the pretty buckskin-clad figure that so lewdly attracted him. There was nothing pleasant in the smile. And the glazing of his eyes was that of excessive alcoholism, and primitive, animal passion. He was unobserved, and he knew there was no need to disguise his feelings.

After a while he crushed the pile of paper money into a hip pocket, and helped himself liberally to more of the spirit.

"It's pretty darn good," he said abruptly, with an appreciative smack of the lips under his curtain of whiskers.

"You mean—?" Keeko did not look round.

"Why, the price." Nicol laughed harshly.

Keeko heard him drink. She heard him gasp with the scorch of the liquor passing down his throat. She waited.

The man moved round and came across to the stove. His gait was unsteady and Keeko was aware of it. She hated, and well-nigh feared the proximity of a man who drugged himself with alcohol on every pretext and at every opportunity.

"Say, you've done well, kid," Nicol exclaimed, with coarse familiarity, and with the intention of conciliation. "Sixteen hundred dollars for those pelts? Gee! You surely must have set Lorson hating you bad."

Keeko was torn by emotions she was powerless to check as she desired. She knew this man for all he was. She knew that he was little better than a savage animal, and, at moments, when alcohol had completed its work, was something even more to be feared.

Of the sober savage in him she had no fear. She had the means to deal with that always to her hand. But influenced by drink it was a different matter. That was his condition now. It was a condition to disturb any young, lonely woman.

She knew she had a difficult part to play. But her mind was made up. She would play it so long as it would serve. After that——

She shook her head.

"No," she said coldly, without looking up. "Guess he didn't know his dollars were going to Fort Duggan. If he had, maybe it would have been different. He doesn't figger to pay big money to the folks he—owns. I'm just a free trader to him. He doesn't even know my name. Maybe he hates free traders. But he's ready to pay if the pelts are fine quality. He didn't worry a thing."

The man's amiability beamed.

"You're a smart kid," he said, with his bold eyes on the pretty figure which the girl's mannish buckskin had no power to conceal.

Again she shook her head.

"The North teaches a mighty tough lesson. If you don't learn it good you're beat right away." Keeko suddenly looked up, and her eyes were gazing directly into the man's. "I've learned a heap. I'm not yearning to learn more. Still— Say, there's times I feel I'd like to get back to the sheltered days when the school-ma'm sat around over a girl till she hated herself. If I'm smart I'm no smarter than I need to be."

"No."

Nicol's eyes were almost devouring as Keeko turned back to the stove.

"We've all got to be smart if we're going to lay hold of the things held out to us," he said. He laughed cynically. "That's how I always figger. Guess I haven't a notion to miss a thing now. The days of foolishness are over."

Keeko was well enough aware of the thoughts which lay at the back of her own words. Now she strove to penetrate his.

"Yes," she said with a quiet confidence which she by no means felt.

Ease, confidence could never be hers in this man's presence, for all she had been brought up to look on him as a step-father. The thoughts of the weeks lying ahead were in her mind. They were always there now. Time. She was playing for time. So she adopted the tone and attitude best suited to help her.

After a moment's silence the man suddenly flung out his hands. It was a movement expressive of his volcanic temper. That which had for its inspiration cynical dis-

regard for anything and everything which interfered with the fulfilment of his own selfish desire.

"Hell!" he cried. "What's the use talking? We got to fix things right here and now. It's for you, as it's for me. We've got to play the game together. There's no other way. Say, I got to make a trip when the ice breaks. It's a hell of a trip. It's going to hand us one of the things held out to us." He laughed harshly. "I've got to grab it for both of us. I need you to stop around while I'm away. You can run this layout just as you fancy to. It don't matter a curse to me, so you stop around."

"What's the trip?" There was a sharpness in the girl's question which had not been in her tone before. "What's the thing held out that's for—both of us?"

"Money. Big money."

"Big money?"

In a moment the girl's every faculty became alert.

Nicol realized the change. His temper resented it. But his cunning robbed him of the retort that leapt to his lips. And all the while the girl's cold, pretty eyes provoked those passions in him which the dead mother had dreaded. Keeko could have no understanding of the unbridled licence rampant in his besotted body.

He nodded.

"It's so big I just can't get all it means—yet. You and me—we're going to be partners in it."

"Partners?"

"Sure."

"What's needed from me?"

Keeko's suspicions were stirring When Nicol talked of "big money" and snatching that held out to him, it was not easy to believe in the honesty of it all.

"Just stop around till I get back."

The girl withdrew her gaze and sat with hands spread out to the warmth of the stove.

"You best tell me," she said quietly but firmly.

She looked for an explosion and she was not disappointed. The hot blood rushed to the man's bloated cheeks. His eyes lit furiously. He had looked for prompt acquiescence. It had been his habit to browbeat the woman who had followed him throughout a long career of crime, and it drove him half crazy to find opposition in her daughter. There could be no doubt of Keeko's determination. She was tacitly demanding her place in the proposed partnership.

"I'm telling nothing—not a darn thing. It's up to me, and no concern of anyone else. Get that. We're either partners or crosswise. And I guess it's not healthy getting crosswise with me. You'll share in the result. Ain't that good enough? All I need from you is to sit around till I get back."

Keeko choked back the angry retort she longed to hurl at him. Those nightmare weeks that lay ahead were uppermost in her mind. They must be bridged at any cost. So she smiled in a fashion that stirred the man's pulses and melted his swift wrath instantly.

"Say, you're asking me to partner in this thing whatever it is," Keeko said in a disarming fashion. "You're asking me to act the grown woman, and treating me like a foolish kid. You guessed just now I was smart. Well? Let's be reasonable folk. Here, listen. You're talking of big money. I guess I know all about big money in this country. The only feller north of 60° who can handle and pay big money is Lorson Harris. And he only reckons to pay big money for something he's looking for bad. The thing he needs bad generally has a deal of dirt in it. Well, how much dirt is there to this trip while I sit around? Guess I'm either a woman or a kid. If

I'm a kid I can't run the layout with you away. If I'm a woman I'll be treated that way. There's nothing in the North to scare me, not even your bluff, any more than Lorson Harris. But tell it all. We'll stand even then. Anyway it's not good betting blind, and I don't feel like acting that way."

The girl's smile robbed her determination of its offence. And Nicol fell for it. The bully in him was struggling with those purposes, that passion which was his greatest weakness. The struggle was brief enough as such a struggle is bound to be. In a moment he capitulated.

"Say," he cried, "you'd break up the patience of Satan. Here, the thing's worth a hundred thousand dollars."

"A hundred thousand dollars?"

The startled tone, the amazement in Keeko's eyes, were genuine enough, and the man grinned his enjoyment.

"Sure," Nicol laughed in the delight of his success. "Do you know what it means? How'd you fancy living like a swell woman on the world's best, and with folks around you to act the way you say? How'd you feel with pockets stuffed with dollars, and wearing swell gowns instead of the darn buckskin that hides up half the woman in you? How'd you like living where you've as much chance of snow as eating ice cream in hell, and supping your tea without needing to blow aside the dead flies floating on top to make a place for your dandy lips? It means that—all that—and more, and it's for you and me."

The girl had recovered from her surprise. Her worst suspicions were confirmed. Her wits were alert, sharpened by the hideous necessity of placating this amazing creature she dared not openly flout.

She smiled again. She threw into her smile all the blandness her sex alone can command.

"I guess you're right. It's Lorson all right. It's too good to let slip. Well?"

"Too good? Well, I'd smile. Too good? Gee!" Nicol was wholly deceived as Keeko intended him to be. He turned abruptly away to the counter where the bottle of rye whisky stood and helped himself to a full measure of it. He drank it down at a gulp. He had won the day. He had swept aside the antagonism he had felt threatened his ultimate purposes. He was on the high road to achieving all he had promised the dead mother in her tortured moments. He felt that Keeko was dazzled. He was buying her as he believed he could buy any woman. The rest would be easy. It only needed a little patience, a little care. So he drank without fear of the potent spirit he loved.

He staggered back to the stove and stood swaying beside the girl. And he rested one powerful hand on her buckskin-clad shoulder while his lewd fingers moved, gently caressing the soft flesh underneath. A wild, panicky desire set Keeko half mad to fling his filthy hand from its contact. But she resisted the impulse. She knew she dared not risk it in his present mood and condition. Filled with unutterable loathing she submitted to it.

"Well?" she demanded, while she forced the smile to her eyes again.

The man leered down at her out of his inflamed eyes. He shook his head with maudlin indulgence.

"You don't need to know any more," he said thickly. "What's the use? You're a gal with clean notions. Guess my hands are used to the dirty sort of work Lorson needs."

"Then it is Lorson?"

"Lorson? Sure it's Lorson. Is there any other dirty swine in the North ready to buy the lives of men?"

"Life?"

"Oh, hell! Yes," the man cried, with a gesture of tolerant impatience. "Of course it's life. Lorson! A hundred thousand dollars! It couldn't be for a thing less than life. It don't rattle me any."

Suddenly he flung caution to the winds. His passions were aflame, and his bemused brain was incapable of reckoning cost.

"It's some folks up north," he went on. "They've a secret trade. Lorson needs that trade. He's had 'em trailed, but they're wise, and they've fooled him all the time. He's crazy about it, and——"

Keeko had risen abruptly from her seat. The movement had rid her of those hideously searching fingers. She could stand them no longer. She stood up with one foot resting on the bench she had vacated, tilting it, and holding it balanced. Her smile had gone, but she was searching the bleared eyes of the man.

"He wants them—murdered!" she said.

But her tone, her look conveyed nothing to the man who had been her step-father. He went on ignoring the interruption completely.

"He means to get them. He set it up to me to locate 'em last summer while you were on the river. It was a tough trip, but I beat all I needed out of the hides of an outfit of the Shaunekuk, and I got the location of their post all right. Gee!" He laughed drunkenly. "Oh, yes, I got all the word I need, an' I guess there ain't a soul but me knows it. Well, I'm going along up north this opening, and I'm going to finish the job, and when it's done, and Lorson's handed the cash-pappy over, and it's set deep in my dip, why, then I'll pass him all he needs. He can get all I know—then. It's a cinch that hundred thou——"

"Who are the folks Lorson means to murder? Do I know them? Have I——?"

The man shook his head. The change in the girl's tone was lost upon him.

"Guess not. I'd say no one knows 'em except Tough Alroy and Lorson. They're an outfit carrying on a trade under the name of Brand—Marcel Brand——"

The bench under the girl's moccasined foot crashed to the ground. Instantly she was stooping over it.

When Keeko finally looked up the bench was under her foot again, balanced as before, and she was smiling. She was pale under the weather tanning of her face. That was all. Her mouth was set, and sharp lines were drawn about it. But she smiled. Oh, how she smiled.

Her lips parted. Her parching tongue moved in a vain effort to moisten them. She cleared her throat which was dry—dry as a lime kiln. When she spoke it was with effort, and her voice had lost its usual quality.

"Marcel—Marcel Brand," she said. "It—it sounds foreign. Maybe it's French-Canadian."

The man shrugged. The nationality of the name did not concern him. He was not even thinking of the murder for which he was to receive a price. It was of the girl he was thinking with all the animal there was in him. The alcohol he had consumed was driving him to let go all control.

"Don't know. Can't say," he said indifferently. "It don't matter two cents to me. It's the dollars when I've done and what they'll buy me. Say, kid—" he drew a long breath like a man preparing for a plunge—"what's the matter with us two making out together? I'll be able to buy you——"

"You're my step-father!" Keeko's eyes lit curiously.

"Step-father?" The man laughed as if he had just listened to something profoundly humorous. "Step-father?" He shook his head. He moved a step nearer, his swaying body ill-balanced as he approached. "I'm

no step-father to you, kid. There ain't a sign of relationship. You're your mother's kid by her man, the man she married, and she and I never saw the inside of a church together. She couldn't have married me if I'd felt that way. Her man's alive I guess. Leastways, we ain't heard of his death. I'm no step-father of yours. That's the stuff she handed you so you wouldn't think bad of her. I couldn't marry her and didn't want to, but I can marry you. See? And this hundred thousand dollars makes it so I can hand you——"

He lurched forward, his arms outheld. And as he came Keeko sprang back.

"Quit it!" she threatened. "Quit! A step nearer and——"

But the man's passions were aflame. He laughed roughly.

"Quit nothing," he cried. "You can't fool me. I'm out to make good for you, and you're standing in. You're going to——"

"You fool man!"

Keeko's tone was cold and her words full of contempt. The white ring of her gun barrel covered him squarely. It was directed at the pit of his stomach, while her eyes, alight with cold purpose, stared unflinchingly into his drunk and passion-distorted face.

The man's movement ceased. The animal shining in his eyes changed to a sudden, livid fury. The standing veins at his temples visibly pulsed, and Keeko knew he was only gathering afresh the forces which her action had momentarily paralyzed. With lightning impulse she seized the chance afforded her.

"You cur! You filthy brute!" she cried fiercely. "Do you think you can play me as you play the miserable women of the Shaunekuks? Get sense as quick as you know how. Get sense. Do you hear? Get out

and do the work you reckon to do, but don't dare to make an inch towards me, or you'll never live to do the murder you're reckoning on."

It was the promptness, the strength and nerve of it all that achieved the girl's purpose. There was no pretence now. Her eyes were alight with a sober, frigid hate and determination.

The man understood. His fury was that of a man whose lusts are thwarted, but his helplessness before the threatening gun was sufficiently obvious.

He sobered abruptly, as once before Keeko had sobered him.

"You can put up your gun," he cried savagely.

He waited. As the girl ignored his invitation he turned abruptly to the counter.

But he was not permitted to reach it. Keeko's voice rang stridently amongst the rafters of the place.

"Stop!"

Nicol stopped and turned.

"You can stop right there," the girl said coldly. "I'm going right out. I'm quitting. You best understand that. I'm quitting, and I'm taking my outfit with me. I don't pass another night under this roof. You best remember I've all I need to fight you. If you get out after me you'll get shot like the dog you are. So you best think—hard."

Keeko moved towards the door. Not for one moment did she turn her back, or lower her gun. And the man's furious eyes followed her till the slam of the door shut her out from his view.

For awhile Nicol remained staring at the dark timbers of the closed door. For awhile it seemed as if his bemused brain failed to grasp the meaning of that which had happened. Then he turned swiftly. He reached the counter and drained the bottle of the last dregs of the

spirit it contained. Then, reaching under the counter, he possessed himself of the gun that was always lying there, and made for the door and flung it open.

He stood in the doorway seeking a sight of the girl he had marked down for his own. But there was none. She was nowhere to be seen. Only he looked out upon the snow, and the woods, and the ice-bound river. So, after awhile, he seemed to change his mind. He closed the door and returned to the stove and seated himself on the bench beside it.

. . . . . .

Keeko was with her Indians at work. Snake Foot, and Med'cine Charlie, and Little One Man were working as they always worked for the white woman they loved.

The outfit with which they had returned from Seal Bay was changed. The dogs were fresh, and the long sled was laden with a canoe that was securely lashed to it. The blankets and stores were loaded in the frail body of the light vessel.

Keeko's plan was clear in her mind, and urgency was speeding her efforts and the efforts of her helpers. She had only one thought now. It was—Marcel. She knew. Oh, yes. There could be no doubt. For her there was only one Marcel. There could be no other. It was Nicol's purpose to murder him and his people. It was for her to defeat that purpose.

Daylight was at its last extremity when the work was completed. And, while Keeko enveloped herself in her heavy Arctic furs, and secured the lashings of her snow-shoes, Little One Man put the only question he had asked as to the journey about to begin.

"We mak' him—yes?" he said, his parchment-like eyelids blinking his enquiry.

"North." Keeko's answer came promptly. "Guess

we follow the river till the ice breaks up. Then we camp, and I make the rest by the water."

"Oh, yes. Him moose head. Yes? And him big hunter—Marcel?"

Keeko smiled into the dusky face of her faithful ally. "That's so—if God wills it."

CHAPTER XVII

THE DEVOTION OF A GREAT WOMAN

THE daylight was lengthening. Very slowly the lolling sun was returning to life and power. A sense of revivifying was in the air. As yet the grip of winter still held. The snow was still spread to the depth of many feet upon the broad expanse of the valley of the Sleepers. But its perfect hue was smirched with the lateness of the season. It had assumed that pearly grey which denotes the coming of the great thaw.

Marcel was standing on the drifted bank of the little river, winding its way towards the Northern hills. He was there for the purpose of ascertaining the conditions prevailing. But his purpose had been forgotten.

Erect, motionless, superb in his physical greatness, he was gazing out at the wall of western hills, heedless of that which he looked upon. He was absorbed in thought that was reaching out far, far beyond the hills which barred his vision. It was somewhere out there where the eyeless sockets of an old moose looked down upon the great river coming up out of the south, cutting its way between the granite walls of the earth's foundations.

Keeko! He was thinking, dreaming of the girl who had come to him in the heart of the far-off woods, with all her woman's appeal to his youthful manhood. He was thinking of her wonderful blue eyes, her radiant smile, her amazing courage. They were the same

thoughts which had lightened even the darkest moments of the howling storms of winter and transformed the deadly monotony of it all into something more than an endurance to which the life of the Northern world condemned him.

But there was more than all this stirring him now. He was moved to impatience, the impatience of headstrong youth. It was not new. He had had to battle against it from the moment of his return to the fort. More than all else in the world he desired to fling every caution, every responsibility to the winds, and set out for the meeting-place over which the old moose stood guard.

He knew it could not be. He knew it would be an act of the basest ingratitude and selfishness. Uncle Steve had not yet returned. He could not return for weeks yet. If he, Marcel, yielded to his desires An-ina must be left alone. His impatience was useless. He knew that. The Sleepers would awaken soon, and demand their trade. He could not fling the burden of it all on the willing shoulders of An-ina. He must wait. He could do no less.

He turned away. It was an act of renunciation. The signs on the river had told him nothing, because he had asked no question. He knew it all without asking. He had known before he had sought his excuse. So he floundered through the snow back to the fort.

The silence was profound. The world at the moment was a desert, a frigid desert. There was no life anywhere. There were not even the voices of warring dogs to greet him, and yield him excuse to vent the impatience of his mood.

He passed the gateway of the stockade where he had so often stood searching the distance in the long years. And so he approached the doorway of his home. A weight of depression clouded his handsome eyes. He was

weighted with a trouble which seemed to him the greatest in the world.

The door of the store opened before he reached it. Keen, watching, understanding eyes had been observing his approach. They were eyes that read him with an ease such as was denied them on the contemplation of the pages of an open book. An-ina had made up her mind, and she stood framed in the doorway to carry out her purpose.

The man's eyes lighted at sight of her. His trouble was lifted as though by some strong hand. This mother woman never failed in her comfort even in the simple fact of her presence. With his thought still filled with the white beauty of Keeko, the soft copper of An-ina's skin, the smiling gentleness of her dark eyes were things at all times to soften the roughness of Marcel's mood.

"Marcel come back? The ice all hold? Oh, yes. Bimeby the trail open and Marcel mak' him. An-ina know. But—not yet."

Marcel made no attempt to conceal his feelings from this woman. He had told her all. He had spread out before her all his hopes and fears, all the impatience of his youthful heart. She had endured the burden of it throughout the long winter not unwillingly, and her sympathy had been yielded abundantly.

Marcel laughed. It was not out of any feeling of joy. It was the self-consciousness of youth before the eyes of maturity.

He shook his head.

"Not yet," he said. "Uncle Steve isn't back anyway."

"No." An-ina sighed. For a moment her smile died out, and her wistful gaze was unconsciously turned towards the North. It only encountered the crude interior

of the storage sheds where the canoes and trail gear were usually kept. One of the sheds was standing empty.

Presently her eyes came back to the man's face, and they were smiling confidently again.

"He come—bimeby. Yes."

Even in the midst of his own troubles Marcel could never be forgetful of this devoted creature.

"He certainly will," he said, in no doubtful fashion. "He'll be along before the Sleepers wake. Say, An-ina, I'm not wise to many things. But there's one I know, like—like nothing else. The North can't beat Uncle Steve."

The dark eyes lit with a feeling which even Marcel realized.

"Marcel good. But An-ina, too, know he come—sure."

The woman paused with her gaze again turned upon the sheds, and after a moment she looked deeply, earnestly into the eyes of the man who held her mother love.

"That why An-ina say to Marcel now," she went on. "She think much. Oh, yes. An-ina think much—this white girl who mak' Marcel all much happy. She far away. Long, long by the trail. Maybe she come where Marcel say when the river all break up. It all long piece 'way. Marcel wait while river him break, then long-piece 'way river break too. So. This Keeko girl she come by river. No? She mak' trail. She think Marcel not come. He no more care find Keeko. So. Marcel go all heap sick. No Keeko—no nothing."

The woman's halting words lost nothing of their purpose in their limitations. Marcel's brows drew sharply together in alarm at the prospect she painted for him. Then, after a moment, he passed a hand across his forehead as though to brush his fears aside.

"But Uncle Steve's not back yet," she said, as though the fact clinched all argument finally.

An-ina, however, had no intention of accepting any such finality. She shook her head.

"That all so. Oh, yes," she said. "Uncle Steve not come back long whiles. But he come back. When him come An-ina say: 'Good. Much good.' Then An-ina say: 'Marcel lose all up white girl, Keeko. Bad. Much bad. No good—nothing.'" She shook her head. "Marcel go now. Take plenty dog. Sled. Canoe. Oh, yes. Take all thing. Reindeer. Everything plenty. So. When river all break Marcel find white girl, Keeko. He bring Keeko to An-ina. An-ina much happy. Uncle Steve happy—too."

The woman drove straight to the purpose at which she aimed. All the problems concerning the lives of the men she loved held for her a perfectly simple solution. Steve would come back to her in his own good time. There was nothing to be considered on that score. Marcel loved the white girl, Keeko. He must meet her again when the winter broke, or he would know no happiness. Then he must go—go now—so that he should be there to greet her when her canoes came up out of the south.

Self never entered into An-ina's calculations. So long as the path of life was made as smooth and pleasant for her men folk as the Northland would permit there was nothing else with which she need concern herself. She would be alone, unprotected. When the Sleepers roused from their torpor their trade must be seen to. Well, that was all right. She could see to it all. She saw nothing in these things which must be allowed to interfere with the happiness of any one belonging to her. Then, too, there was the white girl Keeko. Her simple woman's mind was stirred to wonder and curiosity as to

the woman who had taken possession of the heart of the man who was to her as a son.

The unselfishness of it all appealed to the simple heart of the youth. But the passion that had taken possession of him overrode his finer scruples. The selflessness of the woman was the mother in An-ina. The emotions of the man were the emotions belonging to those primal laws of nature wherein self stands out supreme over every other instinct. An-ina was urging him to go—to go now—to leave her unprotected. It was the very thing for which he had blamed Uncle Steve. And he knew from the moment her words had been spoken that he intended to take her at her word. He shook his head, but his eyes were shining.

"I just can't do it, An-ina," he said a little desperately. "I can't leave you here alone. Suppose——"

An-ina interrupted him with her low, almost voiceless laugh.

"An-ina know," she said with a curious gentle derision which was calculated out of her years of study of the youth. "An-ina no good. She not nothing, anyway. Indian man come beat her head. She fall dead quick. Oh, yes. She not know gun from the 'gee-pole.' She got not two hands. She not learn shoot caribou, same like Marcel. She big fool-woman. An-ina know. Marcel think that. Steve not think that way. Oh, no. Boss Steve plenty wise. So Marcel come wise—later." Again came her low laugh. "This Keeko. This white girl so like the sun, the moon, all him star. Marcel love her? Oh, yes? An-ina say 'no.' Marcel not love her. Marcel love her, he say: 'An-ina no 'count Indian woman. She go plumb to hell—anyway. She nothing. Only Keeko. Marcel love her all to death. He go find her. He not care. Only so he find her.'"

Marcel stood dumb with amazement. His eyes were

alight with a laugh he strove to restrain, but they were alight with something else, too. An-ina watched him. And her laugh came again as she flung her final taunt.

"Indian man say him love An-ina?" she cried. "Indian man not come fetch her—quick? Indian man say him not leave mother for An-ina? Then An-ina spit at him."

It was the savage breaking through the years of simple culture. The appeal of it all was beyond Marcel's power to resist. Suddenly he flung out his two great arms, and the hands that were immense with his muscular strength came down on the woman's soft, ample shoulders, and he held her in a great affectionate embrace.

"That's fixed it, you dear mother thing!" he cried, his face flushing with the joy of it all, the shame of it. "I'm going right away. I'm just going to leave you right here to the darn Sleepers, to the wolves, and the dogs, and any old thing that fancies to get around. There's no woman going to spit at—your Marcel."

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Marcel had gone. An-ina had seen to that. She had given him no chance to change his mind, or to permit his duty to override his desire.

There had been little enough likelihood of any such thing happening. The man was too human, too young, too madly in love. But An-ina was taking no risk. So, with her own hands, she helped him prepare his outfit, and she saw to and considered those details for his comfort which, in his superlative impulse, he would probably have ignored. He went alone. He refused to rouse one single Sleeper to lend him aid. His journey was in that treacherous time between the seasons, when the snow and ice would be rotting, and the latter part of his journey would find his winter equipment an added burden.

Then he had set out. An-ina watched his great figure move away with joy and pride thrilling her heart. He was out to battle with the elements, with everything which the life of the Northland could oppose to him, for the possession of the woman he loved. In her simple, half savage mind it was the sign of the crown of manhood to which she had helped him. She was glad—so glad.

The joy of her thought was her great support in the long days of solitude that followed, and it filled her mind with a peace that left her undisturbed. She filled each moment of her waking hours with the labours which had become her habit. The Sleepers would soon awaken, and all must be made ready for that moment when the work of the open season began. It was her simple pride that with the return of her man he should be able to find no fault.

Ah, she was longing for that moment. The return of her man. Perhaps a triumphant return. She did not know. She could not guess. His success would give her joy only that she would witness the light of triumph shining in his eyes. Happiness for her would lie in his return.

He would come. She knew he would come. Her faith was expressed in the sublime trust and confidence which her woman's adoration had built up about the idol of her life. No god of the human mind was ever endowed with greater, more infallible powers. So the hours of labour were brief and swiftly passing, for she felt that each detail of her daily life was carried out under the approving eyes that, in her imagination, were always looking on. She was happy—utterly, completely happy. She could have sung throughout the hours of waking, had song been her habit. She could have laughed aloud, if the Indian in her permitted it. Heart, mind, and body were absorbed in her faith.

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It was in the dead of night. An-ina stirred restlessly under the blankets which were those that once had covered the white mother of Marcel. In a moment she was wide awake, sitting up in the darkness, listening. The savage barking of the three old dogs, the only dogs now left in the compound behind the fort, had roused her from sleep. It was a furious chorus that warned her of the unusual. It suggested to her mind the approach of marauding wolves, or some other creature that haunted the Northern wastes.

She sprang from her bed without a moment's hesitation. Fear was unknown to her. She knew the old dogs, long past the work of the trail, were not easily disturbed in their slumbers. It was for her to ascertain, if necessary——

The chorus was still raging as she flung open the door of the store, and stood peering out into the brilliant night. Steve's repeating rifle was ready in her hand. She had lit the lamp before she removed the bars of the door, and stood silhouetted against its yellow light. Only a woman or the utterly reckless could have committed such a folly.

With every sense alert, those senses that were so keenly instinct with the perception of the animal world, she searched the shadows within the stockade, and the distance beyond its open gateway. There was no sign of the marauder she looked for. But nevertheless the chorus of the canine displeasure and protest went on. At last she pulled the door to behind her and passed out into the night.

Once in the open her search was swift and keen. The great enclosure yielded nothing to disturb, so she passed on to the gateway, where the barking of the aged dogs had no power to confuse her observation.

The coldly gleaming sky shone radiantly upon the white-clad earth. The calm of the world was unbroken.

Even the wind was dead flat, and not a sigh came from the woods which hid up the dreaming Sleepers. There was nothing. Nothing at all. And she determined to return and to silence the foolish old trail dogs with the weight of a rawhide. Just a few moments longer she waited searching with eyes and ears, then she turned back.

But her purpose remained unfulfilled. She stood seemingly rooted to the spot while her ears listened to the faint distant shout of a human voice. It was prolonged. It had nothing in it of a cry of distress. It was the call of a voice suggesting a simple signal of approach.

For an instant her heart seemed to leap into her throat. Then, in a wild surge, it started to hammer as though seeking to free itself from the bonds that held it. That call. She knew it. There could be no mistake. Nor could she mistake the voice that uttered it. It was the voice of Steve. It was the great return of which her faith had assured her. And high and shrill she flung back her answer, with all the power of her lungs and a grateful heart.

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The greeting had been all An-ina had ever dreamed it. It had been even more, for she had gazed into steady grey eyes shining with the light of triumph.

They were standing in the store where the stove, banked for the long, cold night, was radiating its comforting warmth. Steve, sturdy, unemotional, was replying to the question which had come with the passing of the woman's greeting.

"We're loaded right down, and the dogs are well-nigh beat," he said, in his quiet way. "Guess that's not the reason they're way back camped while I got on to home though. It's the green weed in full bloom, and we

daren't open the bales with folks around without masks. We daren't risk a thing that way. I kind of guessed I'd best get on and warn you and Marcel, and make ready to pass it right into the store-house quick." He thrust up a hand and pushed his fur cap back from his brow. And, for a brief moment, he permitted play to his feelings. "Say, it's great, An-ina! And—and I'm just glad. I guess we've been as near hell as this land can show us, but we've made good. The boys are with me back there. They're feeling good and fit, and we've— Where's Marcel?"

An-ina's eyes were shining with the joy of a triumph no less than the man's. It was the greatest moment of her life. Had not her idol proved himself even beyond her dreams? Her gladness only deepened at his sharp question. She had her great story to tell. The story which no woman's heart can resist.

"Him go," she said, with a little gesture of the hands. "An-ina send him. Oh, yes."

"Gone? Where?"

Steve was startled. For a moment a sickening doubt flashed through his mind, and robbed his eyes of the shining joy of his return.

"It Keeko. She call—call. All the time she call to Marcel, who is great man like to Boss Steve. Yes. Oh, yes. She call—this white girl, Keeko. And An-ina say, 'Go! Marcel go! Bring this white girl.' But Marcel say, 'No. Uncle Steve not come back. An-ina alone. Oh, no. Marcel go bimeby.' Then An-ina say, 'Go.' She know. Him all sick for Keeko. So. Marcel go."

An-ina's low, gentle laugh came straight from the woman in her. Just as her account of Marcel's reluctance to leave her was a touch of the mother defending her offspring.

But Steve missed these things. He was amazed. He was wondering—searching.

"White girl? Keeko?" he exclaimed sharply. "What crazy story— Tell me!" he commanded. "Tell me quick!"

He flung aside his cap, and the furs which encased his sturdy body. Then he caught up a bench, and set it beside the stove. He sat down, and held out his strong hands to the warmth with that habit which belongs to the North.

An-ina remained standing. It was her way to stand before him. She would tell her story thus. Was she not in the presence of the man whose smile was her greatest joy on earth?

CHAPTER XVIII

THE VIGIL

MARCEL flung the fuel upon the fire, and gravely watched the flames lick about the fresh-hewn timber, and the pillar of smoke rolling heavily upwards on the breath of an almost imperceptible breeze.

It was cold—beyond the reach of the great fire—bitterly cold. For all April was near its close the signs of thaw had again given way to an Arctic temperature. It was only another example of the freakishness of the Northland seasons. His journey had been accomplished at a speed that was an expression of his desire. He had taken risks, he had dared chances amidst the rotting, melting snows, only to find at the river, where the old moose head stood guard, that Nature's opening channels had sealed again under a breath that carried with it a return to the depth of winter.

He had not been unprepared. He knew the Northland moods all too well. Besides, his practised eyes had sought in vain the real signs of the passing of winter. The migratory creatures of the feathered world had given no sign. The geese and ducks were still waiting in the shelter of warmer climates. Those wonderful flights, moving like clouds across the sky, had put in no appearance, while the furry world still hugged the shelter and sparse feeding grounds of the aged woods.

His disappointment was none the less at the sight of

the solid, ice-bound river, lying in the depths of the earth's foundations. It was impossible as yet for the girl with the smiling blue eyes, who had given him that message of her love at the moment of her going, to approach the tryst, and he was left with the negative consolation that when she arrived she would find him awaiting her.

His purpose, however, was simple. He was at the appointed spot, and he intended to remain there until Keeko came to him. It was a matter of no significance at all if he had to wait till the summer came and passed, or if he must set out to search the ends of the earth for her. His persistent, dogged mood was an expression of the passionate youth in him. He loved as only early youth knows how to love, and nothing else mattered. He was there alone with Nature in her wildest mood, a fit setting for the primal passions sweeping through his soul.

So, in the time of waiting, he had lit a great fire. It was a beacon fire. And in his simple fancy it was sending out a message which the voiceless old moose was powerless to convey. It was a message carrying with it the story of the love burning deep in his heart. And he hoped that distant, searching eyes might see and interpret his signs. The thought of it all pleased him mightily.

For ten days he had carried on his giant's work of feeding the insatiable thing he had created. He laboured throughout the daylight hours. At night he sat about, where his dogs were secured, gazing deep into its ruddy heart, dreaming his dreams till bodily weariness overcame him, and he sank into slumbers that yielded him still more precious visions.

It was all so simple. It was all so real and human. The cares of life left Marcel untouched. The bitter con-

ditions of the outlands passed him by without one thought to mar his enjoyment of being. Life was a perfect thing that held no shadows, and for him it was lit by the sunshine of eyes the thought of which sent the hot blood surging through his veins till the madness of his longing found him yearning to embrace the whole wide world in his powerful arms.

It was with all these undimmed feelings stirring that he took up his customary position before his great signal fire at the close of a laborious day. He had eaten. He had fed his vicious trail dogs and left them for the night. His blankets and his sleeping-bag lay spread out ready to receive him. And the old, sightless moose gazed out in its silent, never-ceasing vigil.

Night shut down with a stillness that must have been maddening to a less pre-occupied mind. The perfect night sky shone coldly with the burnish of its million stars. The blazing northern lights plodded their ghostly measure with the sedateness of the ages through which they had endured, while the youth sat on unstirring, smoking his pipe of perfect peace. They were moments such as Marcel would never know again. For all the waiting his happiness was well-nigh perfect.

His pipe went out. It was re-lit in the contemplative fashion of habit. A whimper from the slumbering dogs left him indifferent. Only when the flames of his fire grew less did he bestir himself. A great replenishment and his final task was completed.

Again he returned to his seat. But it was not for long. Tired nature was making herself felt. She was claiming him in the drooping eyelids, in the nodding head. And her final demand came in the fall of his pipe from the grip of his powerful jaws. He passed across to his blankets.

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A thunderous crash from the depths below and Marcel was wide awake again. He was sitting up in the shelter of his fur bag with eyes alight with question. He was alert, with the ready wakefulness which is the habit of the trail. That crash! It was——

But he quickly returned to his rest. It was the splitting of the solid bed of ice into which the river that came up out of the south had been transformed.

But somehow he did not readily sleep again. He was weary enough. His mind was at rest. But sleep—sleep was reluctant, and the old thread of his waking dreams came again as he gazed across at the beacon fire.

Hours passed. He had no idea of time. He had no care. He lay there watching the dancing fire-light, building for the hundredth time those priceless castles of the night which the daylight loves to shatter. Never were they more resplendent. Never was their lure more irresistible.

But a drowsy fancy began to distort them. He had no knowledge of it. He never realized the change. He passed to the realms of sleep like a tired child, striving to follow the course of the flying sparks from the fire till his final memory was of a hundred pairs of blazing eyes peering at him out of the darkness.

He awoke with the grey of dawn. And as his eyes opened he heard a voice, a gentle, low voice in which rang a world of gladness and tender feeling.

"Why I just knew no one but Marcel could have lit that fire."

"Keeko!"

Every joyous emotion was thrilling in the man's exclamation. He leapt from his blankets, and stood staring, in utter and complete amazement, at the vision of the girl's smiling beauty.

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Neither knew how it came about. It simply happened. Neither questioned, or had thought to question. The long months of parting had completed that which the summer had brought about. It was the spontaneous confession of all that which had lain deep in the heart of each.

It was the girl who sought release from those caressing moments. Her arms reaching up, clasped about the boy's muscular shoulders, parted, and her warm woman's body stirred under the crushing embrace holding her. Her lips were withdrawn from his, and, gazing up into the passionate eyes above her, she spoke the desperate fears of her woman's heart which had been submerged in the passion of the moment.

"But there's no time to lose!" she cried urgently. "Oh, Marcel, I came because I just didn't dare to wait. It's you—you and those you love. They mean to murder you. You—and those others. And so I came to bring you warning."

The ardent light in the man's eyes changed. But the change seemed slow, as though with difficulty only he was able to return to the things which lay outside their love. But with the change came a look of incredulous amazement that was almost derision.

"Murder?"

He echoed the word blankly. Then he laughed. It was the laugh of reckless confidence engendered of the wild happiness of holding the girl of his dreams in his arms, and feeling the soft, warm pressure of her lips upon his.

For all Keeko's urgency Marcel refused to be robbed of his joy at their reunion. His embrace relaxed in response to her movement, but he took possession of her hands. Deliberately he moved towards the fallen tree-trunk where the lichen-covered cache of their token lay. He sat himself down, and drew her down beside him.

"Tell me," he said smilingly. "Tell it me all. You came to hand me warning. They guess they're going to murder me, and Uncle Steve, and An-ina. Tell me how you came, and all that happened. And the things that happened to you, I reckon, interest me a heap more than this talk of murder."

The easy assurance of Marcel's manner sobered the girl's alarm. She yielded herself at his bidding, and sat beside him with her clasped hand resting in one of his.

Just for a moment she turned wistful eyes upon the ice of the river below them, and her gaze wandered on southwards.

"Oh, it's a bad story," she cried. "I guess it's as bad as I ever feared—worse. Maybe I best tell it you all. But, oh, Marcel, just don't figger it's nothing. I know you. There's nothing I can say to scare you. We've just got to get right away to your home, and hand the warning, and pass them our help."

The girl's appeal had a different effect from that she hoped. The man's eyes lit afresh. He drew a sharp breath. His arm tightened about her body, and the hand clasping hers crushed them with unconscious force.

"You'll come right back with me to our home?" he cried in a thrilling tone. "You?" Then in a moment the great joy of it all broke forth. "Say, I could just thank God for these—murderers."

But the woman in Keeko left her unsharing in his mood. She turned. And her eyes were startled.

"You could—! Say," she cried with a sudden vehemence in sharp contrast to her appealing manner. "Do you think I made trail from Fort Duggan for a fancy, after months of winter to Seal Bay and back, on the day I'd just made home? Do you think I wouldn't have waited for the river? Do you think I'd have done this if it wasn't all—real? Oh, man, man," she cried in pro-

test, "I'm no fool girl to see things that just aren't. I guess David Nicol has located your post, and he's right on his way there now—for murder. There's——"

"On his way there now?" Marcel broke in sharply, fiercely. "How? How d'you mean? He's located—Who's—this David Nicol? God! An-ina alone! Tell me! Tell me quick. An-ina, my second mother, she's alone at the post. A woman! God in heaven! Tell me quick."

The change was supreme. No tone the girl had used could compare with the force of Marcel's demand. There was no laugh on his lips now, no smile in his eyes. A deadly fear, such as Keeko had never beheld in them before, had taken possession of them. He was stirred to the depths of his very soul.

Keeko's reply came at once.

"Yes. Nicol's the man I believed my step-father. He's a murderer. He's the man who sent my mother to her grave before I made home last summer. He's the man who Lorson Harris is going to hand a hundred thousand dollars for the murder of your outfit, and to steal your trade. He's the man who asked me to share with him the price of his crime, and would have held me prisoner to obey his will if I hadn't just had the means right there to help myself. Oh, my dear, my dear. I'm scared. I'm scared to death now for the folks you love. That's why I struck out on a chance for this old moose head, with my boys and dogs. I hoped, I prayed—oh, God, how I prayed!—that I could get around and find you, and hand you warning."

Marcel was no longer seated. He was standing, his great height towering over the girl who was gazing up at him with tears of emotion shining in her pretty eyes. He did not realize them. He was no longer thinking of her. He was no longer thinking of his love, and the

happiness that was so newly born. His thought was far back over the trail of ice and snow over which he had so recently passed. He was contemplating a dusky face with eyes of velvet softness, carrying out her patient labours for the men she loved. He was contemplating the stealing approach of the would-be murderer. He saw in fancy the dawn of horror in the mother woman's eyes as she awoke to realization——

Suddenly he flung out his clenched fists in a gesture of superlative determination and threat.

"Say!" he cried, his eyes hot with a fire such as Keeko had never thought to see in them. "It's two hundred miles of hell's own territory with the thaw coming. I'm going right back—now. I'm going just as quick as I can load my outfit. She's alone—do you get it? An-ina! She raised me—she's my Indian mother woman. God help the swine that harms her body!"

He turned and moved abruptly away. Keeko had come to him with her love. She had faced everything the north country could show her to bring him the warning. He had forgotten her. He had forgotten everything, but the gentle creature whose dark-eyed terror haunted him.

Keeko understood. She had no feeling other than a great, unvoiced joy in the splendid manhood of it all. She stood up. She moved after the man as he made towards his camp. She overtook him.

"They're all down there, Marcel dear. They're down there on the river," she said, as she came to his side and her two hands clasped themselves about his swinging arm. "There's Little One Man, Snake Foot, and Med'cine Charlie. They're good boys, and the dogs are fresh, and ready. I saw to that. We can start right away, and I guess you can't just set the gait too hot."

CHAPTER XIX

THE STORE-HOUSE

STEVE pushed back from the table in An-ina's kitchen. The woman was standing ready to minister to his lightest demands. She had waited on him throughout the meal, and remained standing the whole time. It was a habit, which, throughout their years of life together, Steve had been powerless to break her of. It was her pride thus to wait upon him.

Her soft, watchful eyes were observing him closely as he filled and lit his pipe. There was something approaching anxiety in their depths. It may have been the dull yellow lamplight that robbed the man's face of its usual look of robust health. But if the shadows wrought upon it and the curious pasty yellow tint of the skin were due to the lamplight, certainly the hollows about the eyes, the cheeks, which had become almost alarmingly drawn, and the sunken lines about the firm mouth could not have been attributed to a similar cause.

An-ina understood this. She understood more. She had realized, during the weeks that had elapsed since Steve's return from the heart of Unaga, a curious growing bodily lassitude in the man. It was something approaching inertia, and she knew its cause. Fear had grown up in her simple Indian mind and heart. She wanted to speak. She wanted to offer her warning. But somehow Steve's will was her law, and she knew

that will was driving him now in a fashion that would only leave her words wasted. So, while her lips remained silent, her feelings were clearly enough expressed in her eyes.

"Just a draw or two at the old pipe, An-ina," Steve said, with his flicker of a smile that was full of gentleness. "Guess you can't know the relief of being rid of the mask for awhile. The taste of every breath I draw through it makes me well-nigh sick. Still, it's got to be. It's that or quick death. And I'm not yearning to 'cash in' yet. There's more than two weeks of it still. We brought a hell of a cargo of the stuff. More than I guessed. I'd like to get through with it before Marcel gets back with—this Keeko."

An-ina nodded. Something of her anxiety became absorbed by her tender smile at the reference to Marcel and Keeko.

"The thaw him no come," she said. "Maybe him not find Keeko. Maybe it long—heap long time. Oh, yes?"

Steve stood up and turned his back to the cook-stove. His sunken eyes were reflective.

"No. The thaw's quit, and a sharp spell's closed down again," he said. "He guessed the girl was coming up the river." He shook his head. "There'll be no river open for weeks yet."

He passed across to the door and flung it open. Outside the night was coldly bright, and the still air had a bitter snap in it. He remained only a moment, then he closed the door again.

"We'll get no change till the next moon," he said as he returned. "Anyway, I'll need to get things through before he comes. I don't want the boy to take a hand in the packing. It's a big risk."

"Yes. Boss Steve take all risk. An-ina know." The woman sighed. "An-ina mak' pack. Oh, no!

Much big risk. She not mak' pack. So Boss Steve him say. Boss Steve die all up bimeby. Leave An-ina. Leave him Marcel—an' this Keeko. All mak' big weep. Oh, yes."

Steve's eyes smiled gently. He came over to the woman's side. One hand, that seemed to have lost much of its muscular shape, rested gently on her shoulder.

"Don't you just worry a thing, An-ina," he said. "Guess I know. When Marcel gets back I'll be around all right. I reckon to get through quick. That's why I work late into the night. After I get through, and get quit of the masks, I'll eat good, and be as I was. I just get sick with the dope on the mask, that's all. I'll get right on now."

He laid aside his pipe and passed out of the kitchen. And, as he went, the woman's eyes gazed yearningly after him.

. . . . . .

Steve had lit his lamp. It burned up. It flooded the great store-room with its rank light. He watched it till it settled into full flame, half his strong face hidden up under the mask saturated with its nauseating "dope." Habit forced him to a swift upward glance at the three ventilators in the roof. They were all set wide open. Then he glanced round him surveying the work that occupied his working-day, and half the night he would gladly have devoted to much-needed rest.

It was a curious scene. It was full of fascination in that it represented the complete triumph which for so many years had been withheld from him.

The great store-house, built with so much care and close study of its purposes, and which had stood for so long empty, a pathetic expression of man's hope deferred, was filled to its capacity. A greater part of its shelving

was groaning under bales of closely pressed Adresol in hermetically-sealed wrappings, while the floor was piled with vast quantities of the deadly plant awaiting the process that would render it comparatively harmless to those who had yet to handle it.

In its raw, limp state the plant was unwholesome enough to look at. Its pale foliage had something of the rubbery look of seaweed. But the crushed blooms, oozing thick sap from their wounds, were something almost evil for eyes that had knowledge behind them. Even in his most triumphant mood Steve was not without a feeling of repulsion at the sight. His mask held him impervious to the deadly fumes of the oozing sap, but well enough he knew that, in such a presence, it was only that ingenious contrivance that stood between him and swift death.

He turned to the window to see that it was secure. The door, too, he tried to assure himself that it was shut tight. He was fearful lest the heavy escaping fumes should reach those beyond. The ventilators were built high, chimneys that carried the fumes well up into the night air, where their diffusion was assured, leaving them robbed of their deadly poison. But the window and door were dangerous outlets that needed close watch.

Finally he passed to the far end of the room where his lamp stood on the bench beside the baling machine, and the rolls of curious-looking cloth, almost like oilskin, or some rubber-proofed material, and the large vessel of sealing solution with its brush for application sticking up in it. And forthwith he set to work at the scales upon which he measured his quantities. The organization of it all was perfect. It was Steve through and through, and his calm method seemed to rob the whole process of any sense of danger.

But Steve was sick. He knew it. He knew it was a

race between his condition and the completion of the work. He was living in an atmosphere of contending poisons, breathing one to nullify the effects of the other. There were moments when he wondered how long his body could endure the struggle which he knew must go on to the end, whatever that end might be.

His determination remained unweakening. He knew that An-ina had become aware of his condition, and it only made him the more urgent that his task should be completed before Marcel's return. Whatever happened Marcel must not be permitted to participate in the danger. So, for all his appearance of calm, he worked with a feverish energy in the deadly atmosphere.

Whatever Steve's bodily condition mentally he was fully alert. It even seemed as if his bodily weakness stimulated the clear activity of his mental powers. Working through the long hours of voiceless solitude he held under almost microscopic review every aspect of the situation his final triumph had created. Everything must fall out—provided his sick body endured—just as he had calculated. There was only one thing that disturbed the perfect smoothness of the road that lay open before him. It was the story he had listened to from the lips of An-ina. It was Marcel, and this girl with the Indian name of—"Keeko."

The thought was in his mind now. He was uneasy. The whole possibility of Marcel's encountering such a woman in Unaga had seemed so absurdly remote. A white girl! And yet An-ina had assured him it was true, and the manner of her assurance left it impossible for him to doubt.

Who was this Keeko? How came she in those far remotenesses which he knew Marcel hunted? He could not think unless—His searching mind offered him only one solution. It seemed remote enough. It even

seemed extravagant. Lorson Harris was the evil genius he had to fear. And he sought to connect him with the mystery of it all. Was this Keeko some Delilah seeking to betray the secret he had fought to retain so long? Had she discovered Marcel for the sole purpose of serving Lorson Harris? Was she one of those beautiful lost souls haunting the vice-ridden shores of Seal Bay? It was just possible. There were such women, clever enough, hardy enough to accomplish such a task. It looked like the only solution of the mystery. And he smiled to himself as he thought of the tender soul who had told him the story of it all with such appreciation of its romance.

He realized only too well the fascination such a woman must exercise over a boy of Marcel's years. He would be clay in her hands. Chivalrous, honourable, unsuspicious, what an easy prey he must prove! It was too pitifully easy once the woman discovered him. But even with this realization he was by no means dismayed. He remembered poignantly that An-ina had assured him that Marcel would bring the woman to the fort. Well, if that happened Lorson Harris was by no means likely to have things all his own way. He, Steve, had learned his lesson of women, and was not likely to——

Steve was in the act of bearing down upon the lever of the baling machine. He paused, with the lever pressed only half way home. He stood listening, his bent figure unmoving. There was a sound beyond the door. It might have been the sound of a snowfall from the roof above him. It might have found its source in many things. Yet it was unusual enough to hold the man listening acutely.

Presently, as there was no repetition of it, he dismissed the matter. He was always fearful of possible approach. A moment's thoughtlessness on the part of

An-ina, on the part of his Indians, and the mischief would be done. Even there was always the risk of Marcel's return, and the attraction of the light of the lamp through the window. He dared not for his own sake bar the door. There was always the risk of his mask failing him.

He completed his operation. The oozing weed was compressed, and the binding cords made fast. Then the lever was raised, and the sticky mass was passed on to the outspread sheet for its final packing.

For all the cloth was spread, however, and the bundle was set in place Steve hesitated before enfolding it. The disturbing sound still haunted him curiously. He could never resist the dread of the deadly atmosphere of the room. It needed only one breath—moments one might count upon the fingers of a hand. The thought occurred to him to risk all and bar the door. But it remained only a thought. He forced himself to continue his work like a man who recognizes the weakness prompting him.

He folded the cloth about the bale and reached for the solution brush. But the brush remained where it was. Distinct on the still night air came the sound of a footstep. It was too heavy for An-ina. It had nothing of Indian moccasins in it. It was the heavy footstep of a man, a white man. Marcel!

Steve swung about in an agony of apprehension. But for once in his life his forethought had failed him. He was too late. There was the swift opening and shutting of the door and a man stood inside the room with his back against it. But it was not Marcel. A heavy gun was thrusting forward, and the muzzle of it was covering Steve's body. Helpless, impotent, the man who had taken and survived every chance the Northern world could offer him, stood like any weakling awaiting the shot that must rob him of life in the hour of his triumph.

Steve stared wide-eyed. The man was no taller than himself. He was white, and above his fur clothing was a dark, brutish face with eyes of almost Indian blackness. For a moment they shone fiercely in the lamplight. They were alive with demoniac purpose. A purpose he had come so many weary miles to fulfil. Then, in a moment, the whole picture changed with the rapidity of a kaleidoscope.

The ferocious purpose in the black eyes faded to a ghastly terror. The lids widened, and the eyeballs rolled upwards. A voiceless gasp escaped through wide open lips, where a moment before they had been firm set with murderous intent. The out-held gun-arm dropped, and the weapon clattered heavily to the ground. The man reeled. He tottered forward. Then, with a sigh, a deep drawn sigh, his knees gave under him and he plunged face downwards amongst the litter of the Adresol whose secret he had come to steal. The deadly drug had done its work.

. . . . . .

Steve passed down the room. He came to a stand beside the body of the man, fallen with its face buried amidst the bruised and oozing Adresol. His features were lost in the very heart of a limply spread white bloom. It was as though he were seeking to intake the very dregs of the poison with which the air was laden.

Steve stooped. Seizing the heavy body in his strong arms he dragged it clear of the weed, and laid it upon its back. Then he stood up and gazed down from behind his mask upon the lifeless face that gazed sightlessly up at him.

In those long, silent, contemplative moments memory leapt back, bridging the weary years. There was neither

passion nor pity in his heart. It was almost as if all feeling had passed from him, absorbed in a deep curiosity at the signs which the years had set upon a once handsome face. Even in death they remained. And only a dreadful pallor robbed it of the deeper signs which debauchery had impressed.

Yes. Death had been merciful in that it had restored the features to something of their early good looks. Those good looks, which, backed by the subtle tongue of the seducer, had been sufficient to attract the weak vessel of a foolish woman's heart from the path of virtue that had been marked out for it.

Oh, yes. Steve recognized that ghastly, lifeless face. And just for one moment he hoped that as Death secured its stranglehold the dead creature had recognized his. He wondered.

"Garstaing! Hervey Garstaing!"

The words sounded faintly in the heavy atmosphere. It was Steve's voice hushed to something like a whisper. It was a passionless whisper. There was neither contempt nor hatred in it. Neither was there a shadow of pity.

He turned back to the lamp. He picked it up, and brought it towards the door. The body of his would-be murderer lay sprawled across the floor barring his way. He thrust out a foot and pushed it aside. Then he passed on.

Without one backward glance he turned out the light, and, passing out, made fast the door and removed his dreadful mask.

But, for a while at least, he did not return to the woman who was awaiting him. He moved on to the great gateway of the stockade. Then he leant against one of the gate-posts and stood breathing the pure, cold night air, while his thoughts drifted back over a hundred

scenes, which, until that moment, had remained deep buried in the back cells of memory. He was thinking hard, wondering and searching, striving to probe the full meaning of the man's attack.

CHAPTER XX

THE HOME-COMING

STEVE gave no sign. He saw no reason to admit anyone to the secret of that which had transpired in the store-house. He waited for the approach of an accompanying outfit, he searched to discover the supporters of Hervey Garstaing in his attempt on his life, and, failing all further development, he saw no use in sounding a note of alarm to disturb those who looked to him for leadership and protection. Besides, he was more than reluctant to lay bare anything that could stir afresh those memories from which only the passing of the years had brought him peace.

So he went on with his work, that work whose completion had become well-nigh an obsession. The dead body of Garstaing lay huddled aside, ruthlessly flung where it could least obtrude itself and interfere with the labours upon which he was engaged. Its presence was no matter of concern. It lay there held safe from decay by the power of the drug which had robbed it of life. Later, with leisure, and when the desire prompted, Steve would dispose of it as he might dispose of any other refuse that displeased or disgusted him.

To a man of lesser hardihood, of less singleness of purpose such an attitude must have been impossible. But Steve had learned his lessons of life in a ruthless school. He had no thought for any leniency towards an enemy,

alive or dead. He had no reverence for the empty shell, which, in life, had contained nothing but vileness.

To the last he fought out the battle of physical endurance, and he won out. It was a bitter, deadly struggle in which will alone turned the scale. When the last bale of Adresol was packed, and the door of the store-house was made secure, its treasure in the keeping of its dead guardian, Steve knew that he was about to pay the price. The final removal of his mask found him an extremely sick man. And for two weeks he was forced to fight against the effect of the deadly toxins he had been inhaling for so long. He had saved others from the risk of handling the Adresol. Now he was called upon to pay for his self-sacrifice.

In her silent, unquestioning fashion An-ina understood, and, for nearly two weeks, she watched and ministered to the man of her love with smiling-eyed devotion. Steve never admitted his condition, and An-ina never reminded him of it. That was their way. But never in all their years of life together had the woman been more surely her man's devoted slave. Her every service was an expression of the happiness which the privilege yielded her. Every thought behind her dark eyes was a prayer for the well-being of her man.

For all the inroad the poisons had made upon him, Steve's robust, healthy body was no easy prey, and, slowly but surely, it won its way and drove back a defeated enemy. The spirit of the man was invincible, and then, too, his knowledge of the drugs, both Adresol and those antitoxins which he had been forced to oppose to it, was well-nigh complete. The dead father of Marcel had left him in no uncertainty. He had equipped him perfectly through his writings.

So, with the complete break-up of winter Steve was once more in his place at the helm of his little vessel. He

was there calm, strong, resourceful, ready to deal with every matter that came along as the rush of the open season's business descended upon the fort.

It was as well. The rush was considerable as the Sleepers roused from their hibernation. An-ina, July-man, Oolak, were all his able lieutenants, but Steve's was the guiding mind and hand. The others were people of the same colour as these half Eskimos.

The hubbub and chaffer of it all went on the day long. The store was alive with the squat, black-eyed, dusky creatures, swathed in their Arctic furs. They brought all their trade, surplus stocks of the dried Adresol weed, pelts, beaver and grey fox, wolf and seal. And for these they demanded equipment and supplies for the open season's hunt. They were mainly a good-natured and unsuspicious crowd whose guttural tongue was harsh and very voluble. They needed handling. Essentially they needed handling by the white man.

Steve had been relieved for his midday meal. He was relieved by An-ina, assisted by Julyman. Oolak stood by with his club, ready for any display of the predatory instincts that yielded to temptation.

Steve had not yet returned from the kitchen. He had finished his hearty meal and lit his pipe. He was standing before the window, from which all covering had been removed at the advance of the open season.

The air was chill. For the moment he was staring out reflectively at the clear, bright sunlight, while the buzz of voices in the store hummed upon his ears. It was well-nigh a perfect Northern spring day. The sky was a-froth with white, sunlit clouds. But the sunlight had little relation to the sunlight of more temperate climates at such a season. It was fiercely bright against the melting snows, with a steely chill that entirely lacked the gracious promise of budding trees and tender shooting

grass. At best it spoke of the final passing of the wastes of snow and ice.

These things, however, were not concerning Steve. It was one of those moments of solitude in which he could give run to the thoughts that most nearly concerned him. His eyes had parted from the shadowy smile which they usually wore before the eyes of others. Just now they were scarcely happy, and the drawn brows suggested a lurking trouble that disturbed him. He was thinking of Marcel. Ever since the visitation of Hervey Garstaing, Marcel had rarely been out of his thoughts.

He removed his pipe and passed a hand across his broad brow. It was a gesture of weariness. There were no eyes to witness the action, so he attempted no disguise. It mattered little enough to him that the whole world about him was awakening. It mattered nothing to him that the white world was passing, and the rivers were starting to flood. The feathered world might wing to greet the new-born season. It might darken the sky with its legions. Such things had no power to stir his pulses, any more than had the thought of the great triumph he had achieved over the desperate Arctic elements, if all was not well with—Marcel.

This was his haunting fear. He was thinking of Marcel—and this white girl, Keeko. Even when he had listened to the delighted tones of An-ina, as she told him the story which she had obtained from the boy's own lips, his fears had been stirred. The woman's delight had been the simple delight of a woman in such romance. That side of it had left him cold. He knew the Northern world, his world, too well. He knew the type of woman that haunted the habitations of man in such regions as Unaga. And so he had feared for Marcel.

Since that time had happened those things which warned him of a wide-flung conspiracy of which his secret

trade in Adresol was the centre. Oh, yes, it had needed but one flash of inspiration to warn him of this thing, and his concern was that this beautiful white woman, Keeko, was a link in the chain of the conspiracy with which he was surrounded.

He saw the hand of Lorson Harris in it, guiding, prompting, from that office he knew so well in Seal Bay.

Hervey Garstaing was his tool. There could be no doubt as to that to which the man had sunk. It was the simple logic of such a career as his. A man reduced to haunting Mallard's in his endeavour to escape the law must inevitably sink lower and lower. Garstaing was a Northern man. Sooner or later the Northern wilderness would claim him. The next step would be the embrace of Lorson Harris. No man "on the crook" north of 60° could escape that. Then—? But there was no need to look further in that direction.

But this girl, or woman, this Keeko—her very name suggested to him the vampire creatures haunting the muddy shores of Seal Bay—had discovered Marcel last summer. Marcel, a boy. A boy in years—a child in mind. She would be beautiful. Oh, yes, Lorson Harris would see to that. She would be possessed of every art and wile of the women of her trade. It would be too pitifully easy. She must have returned to her headquarters with the secret he had held so long hidden. And then the coming of the murderer to complete the task Lorson Harris had set.

Now Marcel had gone again to meet this Delilah. He had returned to her in all his splendid youth to be dragged down, down to those backwaters of vice in which her life was spent. Or, having achieved her purpose, would she meet him again? Would she not rather have gone to receive the reward of her betrayal? Anyway it mattered so little. Her mischief was complete. Body and soul,

this youth was doubtless hers. What manner of man would he return?

This it was that haunted Steve throughout the long hours of each passing day. Mind and heart had been set on one great purpose of selfishness. He had gambled his life against overwhelming odds for the sake of this youth. He had won out at terrific cost to himself. And now the joy of his thought was submerged in the prospect of that moral destruction which the evil scheming of Lorson Harris had brought about.

The hopelessness of it all was in simple proportion to the strength and depth of the love and parental affection of the man's heart. But he knew that until the naked truth, however hideous, was revealed he must continue the labours that were his. If the merciless hand of Lorson Harris had destroyed the simple soul of Marcel, then Lorson should pay as he little dr——

Steve started. His depressed brows lightened. His eyes, so full of brooding, widened as he listened. The sound of a voice, big, strong, reached him over the guttural buzz of the trading Sleepers' tones.

"Uncle Steve? He's back. He's—safe?"

The tone was urgent. It was Marcel. And there was that note of force and anxiety in his voice which Steve never remembered to have heard before.

Impulse urged him. It was quite beyond his power to restrain it. He waited not a moment for An-ina's reply. Snatching his pipe from his mouth he shouted swift response as he made for the store.

"Why, surely, boy," he cried. "It don't seem to me there's a thing north of 60° to do me hurt."

. . . . . .

The two men were standing in the doorway of the store, just where they had met. Outside were two dog

trains newly drawn up, and four figures, stranger figures, were moving about them.

Inside the store the clamour of traffic went on undisturbed by the new arrival. Oolak, with his club, continued to shepherd the queer, squat creatures he despised. Julyman was at the rough counter at the command of An-ina, whose outward calm was a perfect mask for the feelings stirred at the unexpected return of Marcel. It was all so characteristic of these people, for all there were momentous words and happenings passing, for all Marcel was conveying news of the threat to their lives which had brought him at such speed back to his home.

The older man, broad of shoulder, sturdy under his rough buckskin, was no match for the youngster who towered over him. And that which he lacked in stature was made up for in the undisturbed expression of his face. Marcel was urgent in his youthful grasp of the threat overshadowing. Steve, while apparently listening to him, seemed to be absorbed in the movements of the strangers beyond the door.

Marcel's story was a brief outline, almost disjointed. It was the story, roughly, as Keeko had brought it to him. He told of the purpose of the man Nicol, bribed by Lorson Harris to steal the secret of their trade. He told of Nicol's confession to Keeko that he had located the whereabouts of the fort, and his purpose forthwith to raid it, and wipe out its occupants, and so earn the price of his crime. He told of Keeko's ultimate terror of this creature's proposals to herself and of the desperate nature of her flight from Fort Duggan to warn Marcel, and seek his protection.

It was all told without a thought for anything beyond the urgency of the threat, and his own youthful absorption in the girl who had taught him the meaning of love. In that supreme moment he had no thought for the thing

that had driven Steve out into the winter wilderness, fighting the battle of his great purpose. He had no thought for the success or failure that had attended him. Steve was there in the flesh, the same "Uncle" Steve he had always known. It was sufficient. An-ina, too, was there, safe and well, and the sight of her had banished his worst anxieties. The lover's selfishness was his. Keeko was outside. She had come with him to his home. She had promised him the fulfilment of his man's great desire. Where then was the blame? Steve had no thought of blame in his mind. And An-ina? An-ina's complete happiness lay in the fact of her boy's return.

"Say, Uncle," Marcel cried in conclusion, with impulsive vehemence. "It's been one hell of a trip. It certainly has. And I'd say a feller don't know one haf the deviltry of this forsaken country till he's hit it haf thawed."

"No." Steve smiled at the four figures he was watching as there flashed through his mind the recollection of the journey of a white man, and a woman, and two Indians, and a child at such a time of year a good many seasons ago.

"You're right, Uncle," Marcel went on, without observing the smile. "But it just needed a woman to show the way, I guess," he cried, in a wave of burning enthusiasm. "Keeko had us well-nigh hollering help from the start. She set the gait. She showed us the way. She guessed that warning needed to get through quick, with An-ina here alone. And she meant to save her if the work of it killed her. She's just the greatest ever. She's the bravest, the best——"

Steve nodded.

"Yes. I guess she's all you say."

The older man's eyes had come back to the handsome

face lit with passionate enthusiasm. There was a twinkle of dry humour in them.

"I know, boy," he said gently. "I get all that. That's why I want to get right out now and hand her thanks and welcome to your home. Guess it's not my way to have folks who've made near five hundred miles to do me good service, standing around waiting while I'm asked to pass 'em welcome. Guess I want to shake this white girl, with the queer Indian name, by the hand. I want to make her just as welcome as I know how. Do you feel like helping me that way?"

In a moment a great laugh broke through the shadow of disappointment that had fallen upon Marcel's eyes at the other's first words.

"You can just kick me, Uncle Steve," he cried. "You surely can. Guess I'm every sort of crazy fool, trying to tell you the thing that's Keeko's to tell. But I didn't think," he added, passing a hand across his forehead. "I don't seem to be able to just now. You see—Say come right along."

. . . . . .

"So you're—Keeko."

Marcel was standing by, looking on with a smiling happiness lighting his face. But he was not observing. Observation at such a moment was impossible to him. He was feasting his happy eyes on the girl's pretty face under the brown fur cap which had been tilted from her forehead. He was looking for her approval of Uncle Steve, and her smiling blue eyes seemed to him all sufficient.

Had he been less concerned with Keeko he must have discovered that which was looking out of Steve's eyes. It was a curious, searching look that had something startled in it. He must have become aware that, for

all the older man's self-restraint, something was stirring within him, something that robbed him of a composure that the dangers and trials of the life that was his had no power to rob him of. Uncle Steve was smiling responsively, a gentle, kindly smile, but it was utterly powerless to deny the other expression.

Keeko withdrew her hands which had been held for a moment in both of Steve's.

"Yes," she said, something shyly. "I'm Keeko."

"Keeko." Steve's echo of the name was reflective. "It's a queer name."

The startled look had passed out of his eyes. But his intent regard remained almost embarrassing. Then, quite suddenly, as the girl turned a little helplessly, and her gaze settled itself upon the great figure of Marcel, he seemed to become aware this was so. He, too, promptly glanced away, taking in the three Indians standing beside the dogs.

"Here, say," he cried authoritatively. "Unhitch those dogs and fix the sleds. You boys best get the sleds unloaded."

Then he turned again to Keeko.

"I want to hand you a big show piece talk, Keeko," he said with quiet ease. "I want to say how glad I am you came along with this boy of ours, and to thank you for the things you figgered to do for us. I guess we aren't going to let the thought of this feller—Nicol—worry us grey. And Lorson Harris, big as he may be in Seal Bay, don't cut much ice up here in the heart of Unaga. We've the measure of most things taken that's likely to hand us worry. There's a home right here for you, for just as long as you two fancy. I take it you've fixed things up between you. Guess it scared me when I first heard tell of you, and I don't need to tell you why I was scared. Now I've seen you it isn't that way. No," he added, in

contemplative fashion. "I kind of thank Providence. He sent you where you found our boy, and later made things so you came along—to home. My dear, I'm just glad." Then he added in response to the wonderful light which his words brought into the girl's pretty eyes: "Say, just come right in. An-ina's inside. She'll get you rested and fed. And she'll hand you a mother's welcome, same as I do a—father's."

The girl made no movement to obey. The tenderness, the simple kindliness that rang in Steve's tones, was so utterly different from anything she had ever listened to in the hard years of nomadic life she had been forced to live. In contrast, the memory of her days at Fort Duggan left her shuddering. The memory of the pitiful subterfuges to which she and her dead mother had been forced to resort in the hope of saving her from the merciless hands of the beast of prey who had ruined so utterly their lives, was something that seemed to belong to some hideous nightmare. For perhaps the first time since the iron of life had entered into her woman's soul she wanted to fall to a-weeping. In her speechlessness tears actually rose to her eyes. She was weary, weary of limb with the hardship of her journey. But now, in the reaction of Steve's welcome, she realized, too, an utter weariness of mind. But her tears were saved from overflowing. She looked to the smiling Marcel, and, with a little helpless gesture, held out her hands.

It was all so unlike the woman who had faced every hardship on the trail. It was all so unlike the strong courage which Marcel knew. He caught her hands in his, and drew her to his side. Then, together, they passed on to the store, while Steve's eyes followed them, and the Indians remained at the work they had been set.

Once Keeko and Marcel had vanished within the store there was no longer need for disguise. Steve's smile

passed out of his eyes. A great light of startled wonder took its place. Unconsciously he turned in the direction of the store-house, concealing its great burden of Adresol—and that other.

For a while he stood there. Then a sound broke from him. It was a single, low-muttered word.

"Keeko!"

He moved away. He passed on to the open gateway of the stockade and gazed far out towards the south-west. The sunlight upon the melting snow was well-nigh blinding. But it troubled him not at all. His eyes were no longer seeing. They were absorbed in a deep contemplation, visualizing scenes that rose up at him out of the dim, distant past. He was thinking of that moment of parting, when he had gazed down into the great blue eyes of his baby girl as she was held up to him by her erring mother.

"Keeko!" he muttered again. "Coqueline!" Then, after a long, almost interminable pause: "Nita!"

CHAPTER XXI

THE GREAT REWARD

YEARS ago Steve had drunk to the dregs a despair that left life shorn of everything but a desolate existence. The effect of that time had remained in him. It would remain so long as he lived. But it was a reverse of the picture which despairing human nature usually presents. It had deepened the reserve of a nature at all times undemonstrative. It had hardened a will that was already of an iron quality. It had deepened and broadened a fine understanding of human nature, and finally it had succeeded in mellowing a tolerance that had always been his. For him those bitter moments had proved to be the cleansing fires which had produced nothing but pure gold.

Now the memory of those dread moments was stirring afresh. But despair had no place in the emotions it provoked. It was all the other extreme. A world of glad hope had taken possession of him. A gladness unspeakable, almost overpowering. A great impulse drove him now. It was a sort of wild desire to yield to the amazing madness of it all, and cry from the house-tops of his little world all that was clamouring for unrestrained expression.

But the man had no more power to yield to this wild surge of feeling than he had had power to yield to the despair of former years. So, for a while, his voice remained

silent, and only his lighting eyes gave index of the thought and feeling behind them.

With the departure of Marcel and Keeko for the mother welcome of An-ina, Steve also returned to the store. He came to release the willing creature, yearning for that moment when she could revel in the joy of the contemplation of her boy's happiness.

Steve took his place in the traffic that was going on, and nodded soberly to the eager, dusky woman.

"Get right along, An-ina," he said kindly. "Guess they're needing you."

"Oh, yes? Marcel—Keeko." An-ina's eyes lit.

"Sure—and Keeko."

And the man's smile as he turned to the waiting customers was something An-ina, at least, was never likely to forget.

Steve contemplated many things for that night. He contemplated unlocking the doors of those hidden secrets of his life to which no one had been admitted. But disappointment awaited him.

When the last of the Sleepers took their departure and the store was closed for the night he passed into the kitchen for his supper. He looked to find Keeko. He looked to find Marcel. He looked to revel in those moments of happiness which still seemed utterly unreal, even impossible. There were so many things he still had to learn before——

But An-ina had all the wisdom of a great mother. And, in response to his question, he received the final verdict from which there was no appeal.

"Keeko all beat to death," she said, with quiet assurance. "She sleep plenty. Oh, yes. Marcel he much angry with An-ina."

She glanced swiftly across at the great figure of Marcel, lounging over the cook-stove, smoking with the happy

content of a luxurious dreamer. The smile that responded to An-ina's sly glance was one of boyish shyness and held no threat of displeasure.

"Guess An-ina packed her to bed, Uncle Steve," he explained. "Keeko hadn't a notion that way, but it didn't signify with An-ina. She reckoned Keeko ought to be plumb beat and needing her bed. So she just handed her supper, and gave her her own bed to sleep in."

Steve glanced from one to the other. Then, in his ready way he nodded.

"Guess An-ina got these things better than you and me, boy," he said. "Anyway where other folks are concerned. There's only herself she don't know about. Guess we can feed ourselves for once, while she finds the blankets she's mostly ready to pass on to other folks."

A flicker of disappointment passed over the dusky face of the woman. But there was no demur. She understood. Steve wanted Marcel to himself for this, his first evening. So she bowed to the man's will.

With her going the two men sat in at the supper table. And of the two it was only Marcel who did real justice to the plain fare An-ina's hands had set out for them. The lover in Marcel left him still a giant that needed bodily support. But with Steve there was a burden of thought and emotion that left food the last thing to be desired.

For some moments there was a silence between them while the steaming tea was poured from the iron pot on the corner of the stove. Each man helped himself from the great dish of dry hash set for them. Steve helped himself from sheer habit. Marcel ate hungrily.

It was Marcel who broke the silence. He was in no mood for silence. There were many things seeking out-

let in his mind. But paramount was the all-dominating subject of Keeko.

"Say, Uncle," he cried suddenly, "isn't she just great? Isn't she——?"

Steve nodded.

"She's greater," he said, with twinkling eyes.

Marcel's eyes widened as he stared across at the man whose sympathy he most desired.

"You're laffing at me," he said quickly.

Steve shook his head.

"No," he said. "I just mean that."

"You do?"

"Yes. There isn't a thing you could say, boy, to make that girl greater in my eyes." Steve laid down the fork on his enamelled plate, and drank some tea. "Say, the story of it all's so queer I can't get the full grip of it. Maybe I will in time. When I've thought. Yes, it's queer. And the queerest of it is you bringing her along to us the way you have."

For a moment his reflective eyes gazed away into the distance. Then alert and full of simple sincerity, they came back to the face of the youth beyond the lamp which stood between them.

"But I want to say right here that I'd sooner see you married to this girl, Keeko, than any other woman in the whole darn world. The day that sees her your wife'll give me a happiness you can't just dream about. Does that make you feel right? I hope so, boy, I hope it bad."

There was no need for the older man's question. The answer was looking back at him out of Marcel's eyes, which were shining with a boyish delight.

"Thanks, Uncle," he returned for lack of better expression. Then, in a moment, it seemed as if he could contain himself no longer. And words literally tumbled from his lips. They were hot, frank impulsive words,

all unconsidered, all straight from an honest heart. "Say, you've just been everything to me. You and An-ina. And I've never had a chance to make return or do a thing. Oh, I know. But for you An-ina and I would have been left to chase the country with no better lot than the darn Sleepers. I've thought and thought. And I know. You've helped me grow a man. You've taught me life. You've taught me just everything one man can teach another. Oh, I guess I'm grateful. I feel so I can't ever repay you. I've wanted to. I want that way now. And, say, you can't ever stop me again. You're glad I'm going to marry Keeko. Why, it just means all the world to me. Now I'm a man. I'm no fool kid any longer. The summer trail's over for me, and I'm going to take my place in the great fight you've been making all these years. You can't deny me—now. I—I won't stand for it——"

Steve's smiling shake of the head brought the boy to a blank-eyed stop.

"The fight's won," he said. "There's no more fight for us."

"You mean——?"

Steve jerked his dark head in the direction of the storehouse.

"It's full," he said. "Full, plumb up, of green weed. There's thousands of the deadly lily blooms in there, packed and ready for Seal Bay. Lorson Harris has lost the dirty game he's playing, and now—now he'll just have to pay us all we choose to ask."

Marcel's food was forgotten. He stared across the table, blank amazement looking out of his eyes.

"You've found it? The growing weed? You've brought it home? Uncle!"

"Yes." Never were Steve's eyes more sober. Never were they less emotional. "You were full up to Keeko

when you came along so I didn't tell you. Two sled loads. As heavy as we could bank 'em up. I figure, according to your father's reckoning of the stuff, there's well-nigh a fortune lying back in that place." He paused and drew a deep breath. "Yes. I got the trail. We can help ourselves. It's right in the heart of Unaga, where the world's afire, like hell opened up from below. Say, boy, I've seen wonders, the like I never dreamed about, and we beat all this country could set up to keep safe its secrets. We passed through one hell only to reach a worse. But we got it. We found it. And—the fight's won."

Marcel forgot everything in that concise narrative of Steve's success. All his lover's selfishness faded before the tremendous significance of that final great adventure. He even forgot his own disappointment that he had not been permitted to share in it. This great thing had happened, the fulfilment of the dream that had been theirs. Then in a moment he remembered. A thought, an apprehension flashed swiftly through his mind. Lorson Harris! The man—Nicol!

"Is it finished?" he cried, with a swift change of manner. "Or is it only just beginning? Say, Uncle—you've forgot. Harris! This feller we brought you word of. Say——"

Steve shook his head.

"It's finished," he said, with a ring in his voice that carried absolute conviction. "Oh, yes, it was like you to spare no effort to make home with warning. I'm not blinded. Keeko made the journey to you with word, but it was you who forced that journey through the haf thaw to save An-ina and me. I can see you driving through as man never drove before, and I guess I get the feeling that made you pass the credit on to Keeko. But I allow she'll have a different yarn of that journey.

Anyway, there's no worry to this thing. I care nothing for Lorson Harris, or this scum—Nicol. We've the growing weed. And the battle's won."

For moments Marcel had no answer in face of Steve's denial, so sternly confident and assured. Young and impulsive as he was the force of the older man was still irresistible. He drew out his pipe and filled it thoughtfully, and finally disappointment took possession of him.

"Then there's nothing—nothing more? It's done?"

Just a shadow of eagerness crept into Marcel's final question. He felt he was being robbed of the last chance of making return and proving his manhood to the man who had given up his life to him.

Steve was swift to read the prompting of the other's words. He laughed silently, gently, and his eyes were alight with deep affection.

"No. There's things to do yet," he said. "Oh, yes. There's a whole heap. Your father didn't reckon to quit on the first load. He reckoned to help the world with all his knowledge and body. And that's what I figger to do—with your help."

"Ah!"

"Guess I see it this way. This summer sees you and Keeko in Seal Bay. Me too. We've to trade our weed. And I guess, if it suits your fancy, we'll find the passon feller, that can't kick religion into that township, ready to fix you and Keeko up. After that there's the winter trail for us both, for just as many seasons as you fancy. We've a mighty big work still, before we strip the heart of Unaga of the treasure the world needs."

In the reaction from his disappointment Marcel's generous nature asserted itself. He saw himself at last admitted to that which he considered the work of manhood. And he sought to embrace it all.

"But you, Uncle," he cried earnestly. "Is there need?

Why should you have to go on? Think of all you've done. Why, say—pass the work to me, and take an easy."

Steve's eyes promptly denied him.

"Easy?" He shook his head. "Why should I? Guess the north country's mine for keeps, boy. And when my time gets around I hope it finds me beating up the dogs at 40° below, with a hell fire blizzard sweeping down off the Arctic ice."

. . . . . .

Steve was abroad early next morning. He had talked long and late with Marcel over-night, and their talk had been mostly of Keeko and her life, as the lover knew it. Never, to the moment they parted for the night, did Steve display weariness of the subject of their talk. To Marcel it seemed natural enough that this should be so. But then he was little more than twenty, and in love. Steve's urgency for detail must have been pathetic to any onlooker. To Marcel it was only another exhibition of his goodness and sympathy for himself.

Steve had little enough sleep after he left the boy. For once in a hardy lifetime he lay under his blankets with a mind feverishly alert. He was yearning for the passing of night. He was well-nigh crazy for the sun of the morrow. Yet withal a wonderful happiness robbed him of all irritation at his wakefulness.

So it came in the chill dawn of a perfect spring morning, in which only the melting snow had reason to weep, he was moving abroad in heavy boots wading through the slush which would soon be past. He watched the sun rise from its nightly slumber, and its brilliant light amidst the passing clouds of night was a sign to him. It was the dawn of his great day. It was the passing of his years-long night.

As the clouds dropped away and vanished below the horizon, leaving the sun safely enthroned, an amazing jewel set in the world's azure canopy, he passed again into the store. Even on this great day habit remained. He replenished the stoves, and set the boilers of water in place for An-ina. After that he passed out again, and made his way to the store-house that held his secret.

He adjusted a mask upon his mouth and nostrils and tasted again the sickening drug he had learned to hate. He unfastened the door and passed within. For a long time he remained with the door closed behind him. Later he reappeared, and, removing his mask, passed out into the pure air of the morning. He secured the door behind him.

Absorbed in thought, his eyes unsmiling, he was making his way back to the main building. It was not until he had almost reached the door that he became aware of An-ina's presence. It was her voice that caused him to look up.

"Look," she cried in her soft tones, and pointed.

Steve followed the direction of her lean brown finger. Marcel and Keeko were standing in the great gateway of the stockade.

Steve's smile was good to see and An-ina responded in sympathy.

"They love. Sure. Oh, yes," she said.

Steve nodded. He was gazing at the tall, graceful figure of Keeko. He seemed to have no eyes for the boy at all. Keeko, in her mannish clothes of buckskin, her beaded, fur-trimmed tunic which revealed the shapeliness of her youthful body. The vision of it all carried his mind back so many years.

"Keeko for Marcel. Marcel for Keeko. Yes?"

Steve drew a deep breath.

"Yes. Thank God."

He moved away. There was no ceremony between these two. Steve's love for An-ina was built upon the unshakable foundations of perfect understanding. He strode out towards the gates, and the lovers heard the splash of his boots as he waded the melting snow. They turned. And it was Marcel who made half-shamefaced explanation.

"I was telling Keeko of the weed," he said. "I was telling her of the fire country which I guess she got a peek at last summer—from a distance. She was asking to know the trade Lorson Harris was yearning to steal, and the feller Nicol was ready to murder for. She guesses it's most like a fairy yarn."

Steve's eyes were steadily regarding the girl's smiling face. He noted the beautiful, frank, wide eyes, the perfect lips that so reminded him— The fresh, clear, transparent cheeks forming so perfect an oval. Then there was her fair hair escaping from beneath the soft edges of her fur cap. She was prettier even than he had first thought.

"I allow it maybe sounds that way," he said. Then he shook his head. "But there's nothing unreal to it. No. There's no more unreal to Adresol than there is to the hell fires raging away out there in the heart of Unaga, where the whole place is white like a lake of pure milk with the bloom of the plant that breathes certain death, but which holds in its heart the greatest benefit the world's ever known. It's all queer, I allow. But—say—" He turned and pointed at the storehouse. "It's all there. It's baled ready for Lorson Harris to buy. You can get a peek at it, at the stuff these folks reckoned to steal. Will you——?"

The invitation stirred Marcel to prompt anxiety. He laid a hand on Keeko's soft shoulder as she prepared to move away.

"Is it safe, Uncle Steve?" he demanded hastily. "You see, Keeko's not like——"

"Safe? Sure." Steve produced two masks. "I've worked in there for weeks, boy, with these things set on my face. I've worked all day and haf the night—baling. Sure it's safe. You go, too. There's a mask for each, and I guess they aren't just things of beauty. We'll go along over, and I'll fix 'em for you. I kind of fancy Keeko should see what's hid up in that store-house."

Steve led the way, and, hand in hand, like two children, the others followed him. At the door of the store-house he paused and turned. He stepped up to Marcel and adjusted his mask. And while he adjusted it his eyes remained unsmiling. He was careful, infinitely careful, in the adjustment, and in reply to the youth's protest at the nauseating taste of the drug he was forced to inhale his retort was briefly to the point.

"Sure it's no bouquet," he said. "But it's that or a—halo, and wings and things."

Keeko offered no protest at all. She was impressed far more than she knew. It seemed to her that the simple trust which prompted the man's action in revealing his secret to her, the secret Lorson Harris was willing to pay a hundred thousand dollars for, was something too simply wonderful for words.

With the adjustment of the masks Steve removed the fastenings that barred the door. He held it closed a moment and turned to Marcel.

"You'll go first, boy. You'll go right in. I guess you've got the masks so I can't come with you. I want you to take Keeko, and show it all. Maybe you'll find things there you don't understand. That don't matter. Maybe you can figger them out between you."

Then he turned to Keeko and his steady eyes regarded her seriously under the disfiguring mask.

"Get a look at it all, my dear. All. But say, as you value your life—and Marcel's and my peace of mind—don't shift that mask a hair's breadth, no matter how you feel—looking around. When you come out you can tell me about things."

He set the door ajar, and leading the girl by the hand Marcel passed into the house of death.

. . . . . .

Steve stood guard. He listened with straining ears. There came the faint sound of muffled voices from within, and the sound of movement. The moments dragged slowly. Once he thought he heard a series of sharp exclamations. But he could not be sure. He expected them. That was all.

After awhile the voices ceased, and there only remained the shuffling of feet whose sound drew nearer. The visit was short, as he expected it would be. He understood. A moment later he felt pressure against the door.

He opened it, and Keeko and Marcel returned to the open air. Without a word Steve re-fastened the door. Marcel dragged the mask from his troubled face and Keeko followed his example.

Steve turned from the door and stood confronting them. His eyes were hard. They were almost fierce as he looked into the startled faces before him.

"Well?" he demanded. Then his gaze rested on the girl. "You saw—it?"

Keeko inclined her head. She hesitated. A curious parching of throat and tongue left her striving to moisten her trembling lips.

"Yes," she said, at last.

"And it was—Nicol?"

"Yes."

Quite suddenly Steve laughed. It was a mere expression of relief, but it succeeded in robbing his eyes of a light which so rarely found place in them. He pointed at the closed door.

"He came here in the night," he said. "I don't know how he came. I never saw a sign of his outfit. Maybe they left him, as he didn't get back."

He shrugged indifference.

"It don't matter anyway. I was at work. Same as I'd been at work nights. I'd a lamp burning. Maybe he saw me through the window. I guess that was so. The door was shut, but unfastened. I didn't dare keep it fast, working in there. Well, I heard a sound. The door was pushed wide and he jumped in on me with a loaded gun at my vitals. He'd got me plumb set. Sure. But the dope. It didn't give him a chance. It got a strangle-holt right away, and he dropped dead at my feet. He's—he's your step-father? The man you came to warn me of?"

"Yes."

Steve nodded.

"Here, let's quit this place. Guess it's not wholesome standing around. Pass me the masks. We'll get right over to the sheds. There, where it's dry, and we can sit. There's things I need to tell you right away. Both of you."

. . . . . .

Marcel and Keeko were sitting side by side on one of the sleds which had not yet been completely unloaded. Steve was squatting on an upturned box that had been used to contain food stores for the trail. He was facing them, and his back was towards the building of the store. It was rather the picture of two children listening to some wonderful fairy story, told in the staid tones of a well-

loved parent. Never for a moment was attention diverted. Never was interruption permitted. Even the approach of An-ina passed unremarked.

And as Steve talked a beam of sunlight fell athwart his sturdy figure, lightening its rough clothing, and surrounding him with a penetrating light that revealed the sprinkling of grey beginning to mar the dark hue of his ample hair. The lines, too, in his strong face, fine-drawn and scarcely noticeable ordinarily, the searching sun of spring had no mercy upon.

"Oh, it's a heap long way back," he said, "and I guess it all belongs to me. Anyway it did till Keeko got around. Say, you need to think of a crazy sort of feller who guessed that most all there was in life was to make good for the woman he loved, and the poor girl kiddie she'd borne him. You need to figger on a feller who didn't know a thing else, and thought he was acting square and right by his wife the whole darn time. He was a fool, a crazy fool. But he did all he knew, and the way he knew it. His duty was the law and order of a wide enough territory around Athabasca, which is just one hell of a piece of country from here. When you've thought of that you want to think of a real good woman, all pretty, and bright, with blue eyes and fair hair, and her baby girl the same. You want to reckon she was just about your ages, and was plumb full of life, and ready for all the play going. When you've got that you want to think of her man being away from their home months and months, winter and summer. It was his work. And all the time there's a feller, a mean, low, skunk of a feller with a good-looker face, and the manners and talk of a swell white man, hanging around on that home doorstep. So it goes on. How long I don't know. Then comes a time when this p'lice officer gets out on a mission to Unaga. And it's the other feller that has to hand him

his orders. Do you see? That trip's a two years' trip, and the pore gal is just left around home with her baby the whole time. Oh, she's got her food, and home, and money. That's so. Well, at the end of that trip the feller gets back. He's found up there a white kiddie, and an Indian nurse woman, and the hell of a tragedy of the boy's parents. So he brings the kiddie back, a little brother to his baby girl."

Steve drew a deep breath and stirred. When he went on his eyes were gazing out at the sunlight beyond the shed.

"When he made home with the life well-nigh beat out of him, his outfit a wreck, and the nurse woman and the kiddie no better, his wife and his baby girl were gone. They'd been gone a great while. So had the man. They had gone together, and the man was wanted for stealing the Treaty Money of the Indians he was the government agent for. Do you get that?"

Keeko nodded. She was listening with breathless interest for she felt the story was addressed to her. Marcel, too, was absorbed. But the ultimate drift of the story was scarcely as clear to him yet.

"Well, it don't need telling you the things that happened after that," Steve went on with a half-smile that was something desperately grim. "Maybe that feller went nigh mad. I don't know. Anyway, when he got better of things he hit out after that skunk of an agent in the hope of coming up with him, and killing him."

"But he was saved that. Maybe it was meant he should be. We can't reckon these things. Anyway he never saw his wife again. He never saw his baby girl. And—he never saw Hervey Garstaing till weeks ago he came under the label of Nicol—right along here to set the story of murder into his book of life. He's there in that store-house and he's been dead weeks. Only the rotten-

ness in him hasn't broke out because of the weed. Anyway he's dead. He was a scum that had no place in this world, and I guess Providence handed it to him in its own fashion and time. He robbed me of Nita. He robbed me of——"

"Nita—my mother's name." Keeko's voice was choked. A world of emotion seemed to be striving to overwhelm her. Marcel in bewilderment was regarding only the strong face of the man seated in the sunlight.

Steve inclined his head.

"Yes. Nita was your mother."

An uncontrollable impulse urged the girl. She had no power to resist it. Why should she? This man—this man to whom Marcel had brought her, with his steady eyes and strong face. He—he——

She sprang from her seat beside her lover, the great creature staring so amazedly at the man, who, for a moment, had permitted a glance into those close-hidden secrets of his heart. In a moment she was on her knees at Steve's side, and the man's hands were grasping hers in their strong embrace.

"And you—you are my—father!" she cried.

Steve crushed the hands in his with a power that told of the feeling stirring.

"Yes," he said simply. Then he added very gently, very tenderly. "And you—you are my little baby girl, Coqueline."

And in the silence that followed there reached them from close behind the sound of the low, soft voice of the mother woman.

"So. An-ina glad. Oh, yes."

THE END

The Gold Girl

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